

**‘BRAND VICTIMISATION’: WHEN CONSUMERS ARE
BULLIED BY FELLOW BRAND FOLLOWERS IN
ONLINE BRAND COMMUNITIES**

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Declaration of Authorship

The research reported in this thesis is my own, except where indicated, and has not been submitted for any degree at any other institution.

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Abstract

This thesis investigates the phenomenon of a consumer being bullied by a fellow brand follower in an online brand community, which is termed ‘Brand Victimisation’. The thesis aims to provide a comprehensive review of the area of brand victimisation in online brand communities. In doing so, it aims to develop a conceptual model which can be used to explain how consumers in online brand communities react to brand victimisation. The thesis further aims to explore the potential negative impact that brand victimisation potentially has on victims (i.e., consumers who are bullied) and the respective brands, as well as to suggest how such negative consequences can be mitigated. Lastly, the thesis aims to provide a model that explains how victims react to being bullied in online brand communities. The thesis sets out to answer the following research questions: (1) What is known about inter-consumer hostility in online brand communities and what remains unexplored and needs to be investigated further? What theoretical models can help to conceptualise brand victimisation as a marketing phenomenon?, (2) What are the potential negative consequences of brand victimisation in online brand communities for victims and brands? and (3) What process do victims undergo when coping with being bullied in online brand communities? To address these research questions, three independent studies were conducted.

Study 1 (Chapter 2) addresses research question 1 by providing an integrative literature review on hostile interactions between consumers and indicates where brand victimisation fits in conceptually as part of the interaction process. The study adopts Lasswell’s model of communication (Lasswell 1948) as a guiding theory to conceptualise hostile consumer-to-consumer interaction process and to provide a more comprehensive understanding of brand victimisation. The study contributes to the marketing literature by showing the current state of research in the area, identifying research gaps,

conceptualising inter-consumer hostility in online brand communities, and offering avenues for future research.

Study 2 (Chapter 3) addresses research question 2 by conducting a scenario-based experiment to assess how brand victimisation affects three outcome variables, namely a victim's positive word-of-mouth intentions, community satisfaction and community following intentions. Following meta-analytical evidence from the cybervictimisation research, the experiment accounts for two central influences (victimisation severity and bystander reactions) on how victims react to being bullied in online brand communities. The experiment compares the impact of victimisation severity (severely aggressive versus mildly aggressive incident of brand victimisation), and the reactions from bystanders (i.e., other brand followers in the community who witness the victimisation incident) who either defend the victim, reinforce the victimisation or pretend that they do not notice the incident. Using a scenario-based experiment where brand victimisation was manipulated ($n=387$), the results show that outcomes significantly differ in relation to the severity of victimisation (Severe vs Mild) and the reactions from bystanders (Defending vs Reinforcing vs Pretending). The findings contribute to marketing theory and practice by providing novel insights on the negative effects of brand victimisation on brand- and community-related outcomes. The findings also offer brand managers a better understanding of the undesirable effects of brand victimisation, and on the type of reactions from bystanders that they may like to encourage in order to mitigate such negative consequences.

Study 3 (Chapter 4) addresses research question 3 by adopting the theory of stress and coping (Lazarus and Folkman 1984) as a framework to assess how victims think about, feel about, and cope with brand victimisation. Based on the dataset used in the study 2, 300 respondents were isolated and included in the analysis. The findings show that the severity of brand victimisation (Severe vs Mild) influences a victim's well-being

and perception towards company accountability, mediated by a victim's emotional appraisal (anger and fear) and choice of coping strategy (retaliation and avoidance). The results indicate that retaliation and avoidance lead to opposite effects where avoidance strategy leads to lower negative well-being compared to when victims decided to retaliate to the bully. The study is the first to provide an empirically verified framework which illustrates how consumers respond to being bullied in online brand communities. The study contributes by developing and testing an empirical model of brand victimisation as a novel consumer phenomenon within the online brand community literature. The findings add to the limited research on the negative consequences of brand victimisation by demonstrating the detrimental effects of brand victimisation on victims' psychological well-being and perception towards companies that hosted online brand communities on social media. The findings also offer brand managers an understanding about the type of consumer coping strategies that they may like to encourage.

Finally, the thesis concludes by providing a summary about how the findings of Chapter 2–4 are interrelated, as well as links the theoretical and managerial contributions from each chapters thematically into a cohesive whole. The final chapter also summarises the limitations of the research and provides guidance for future research to enhance knowledge in the domain of brand victimisation in online brand communities.

Overall, the thesis contributes to the limited literature on inter-consumer hostility on social media, and particularly the lack of research on the perspective of victims who are bullied by fellow brand followers in online brand communities. It contributes to the online brand community literature by showing the current state of research in the topic area, identifying research gaps – some of which are explored here – and outlining avenues for future research in the domain of brand victimisation in online brand communities. It provides novel insights that highlight the negative impact of being bullied in online brand communities on brand and community-related consequences. It offers an empirical model

that conceptualises the interaction process that victims go through when being bullied in online brand communities. It also highlights the importance of situational factors (victimisation severity and bystander reactions), psychological factor (negative emotion) and behavioural factors (coping strategies) on influencing the outcomes of brand victimisation.

Through this thesis companies will gain a better understanding of brand victimisation in online brand communities and on the negative effects that this online phenomenon has on consumers and brands. The empirical evidence about the consequences of how brand victimisation affects victim's perception and behavioural intentions towards brands consequently encourages companies to detect and tackle brand victimisation that occurs in their online brand communities. The findings of this thesis also provide guidance on how, and in what circumstances, companies can mitigate the negative effects of brand victimisation.

The thesis follows a three-paper model, consisting of three separate papers (Chapter 2-4) that conceptualise brand victimisation and explore its consequences. The three papers are embedded in a thesis framework that starts with a general introduction to 'set the scene' (Chapter 1), a literature review on inter-consumer hostility in general and how brand victimisation fits into extant research (Chapter 2), two empirical chapters that explore the consequences of brand victimisation (Chapter 3-4), and a general conclusion of the thesis (Chapter 5).

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Papers Developed in Conjunction with this Thesis

Journal submissions

1. Chapter 2: Inter-Consumer Hostility in Online Brand Communities: A Conceptual Framework and an Agenda for Future Research
 - Targeted at European Journal of Marketing
2. Chapter 3: If It's Bad, Don't Pretend It Didn't Happen! Exploring the Outcomes of Victimization and Bystander Reactions in Online Brand Communities
 - Submitted to Journal of Interactive Marketing – Rejected
 - Submitted to Journal of Business Research – Rejected
 - Now being reviewed at International Journal of Electronic Commerce
3. Chapter 4: Coping with Brand Victimisation – A Study on How Consumers Respond to Being Bullied in Online Brand Communities
 - Targeted at Psychology & Marketing

Conference submissions

1. 14th Global Brand Conference (Accepted - Presented on 8 May 2019 at Berlin, Germany)
 - Title: “Brand Victims on Social Media – How Consumers Cope with Being Bullied About Their Brands”
2. Interactive Marketing Research Conference 2020 (Rejected)
 - Title: “Brand Victimisation On Social Media: The Effects on Brand Victim, Brand, and Brand Community”

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Introduction

Online brand communities have become an increasingly popular marketing channel which allow companies to get in touch with brand followers and convey brand-related content (Beukeboom, Kerkhof, and de Vries 2015). Recent statistics show that more than 50% of social media users have followed brands on social media (Statusbrew 2019). Importantly, having online brand communities on social media significantly improves exposure, awareness, engagement, commitment, and credibility of the brands as reported by more than 70% of companies (Venngage 2019). Likewise, brand followers can share their common interests about brands, receive updated information from the brands, support the brands by liking content, and interact with other brand followers through online brand communities (de Vries, Gensler, and Leeftang 2012; Lin and Lu 2011; Shi, Chen, and Chow 2016).

Although online brand communities offer many benefits to both consumers and companies, there is a 'dark side' to such communities. Research highlights that being a victim of cyberbullying on social media, a behaviour commonly defined as cybervictimisation (Álvarez-García et al. 2017), is becoming increasingly common. A survey of American adults (n = 4,248) indicates that 41% of respondents have been personally cybervictimised, and an even larger number of respondents (66%) have witnessed others being cybervictimised (Pew Research Centre 2017). A recent survey also highlights that the number of teens experiencing cybervictimisation increased from 32% in 2016 to over 50% in 2018, indicating a rise in cybervictimisation over the Internet (Statista 2019).

Marketing scholars have started to investigate similar developments related to cybervictimisation in online brand communities. Research shows that brand followers

may become victimised because they post comments to support rival brands (Ewing, Wagstaff, and Powell 2013; Ilhan et al. 2018), or due to their complaints about negative product or service experiences (Bacile et al. 2018; Bacile 2020). In addition, research also shows an increasing trend of consumers becoming victims of trolling – where a brand follower is verbally attacked by other brand followers without any obvious reason (Breitsohl, Roschk, and Feyertag 2018; Golf-Papez and Veer 2017). These studies confirm that online brand communities can be an environment where brand followers can be victimised. Furthermore, some companies have recognised the problem of cybervictimisation in online brand communities, and it potentially causes a negative impact on the companies. Coca-Cola, for instance, has experienced negative consequences caused by hostile interactions between brand followers in their online brand community on Facebook (Coca-Cola 2020). The bullying behaviours among some community members caused the company to suspend advertising on every social media channel globally for a month. Consequently, this led the company to reassess its social media practices, aiming to drive the online brand community towards a safer, hate-free environment.

Figure 1.1 illustrates a victimisation incident in online brand communities focusing on the roles of three main actors in the victimisation process. Drawing on the cybervictimisation concept and the role of individuals in the cybervictimisation event (Kowalski et al. 2014), the left side of the model is a consumer who acts as a ‘bully’ (i.e., initiates the victimisation by attacking others), while the right side is a consumer who becomes a ‘victim’ (i.e., gets attacked). There is also a consumer who is involved in the incident as a ‘bystander’ (i.e., witnesses the incident and may or may not get involved).

Taking an example from Nike’s online brand community on Facebook (Nike 2018), a brand follower (who later became a victim) posted the following comment in response to the video advertisement posted by Nike: “I have never been a Nike fan but I

am now and I will buy a pair today”. After posting the comment the brand follower was bullied by another brand follower (i.e., a bully) with a hostile comment: “You are a pathetic piece of shit!”. Subsequently, other brand followers (i.e., bystanders) started to post additional hostile comments such as: “You are a special kind of stupid”, “dipshit!”, and “Okay LOSER”.

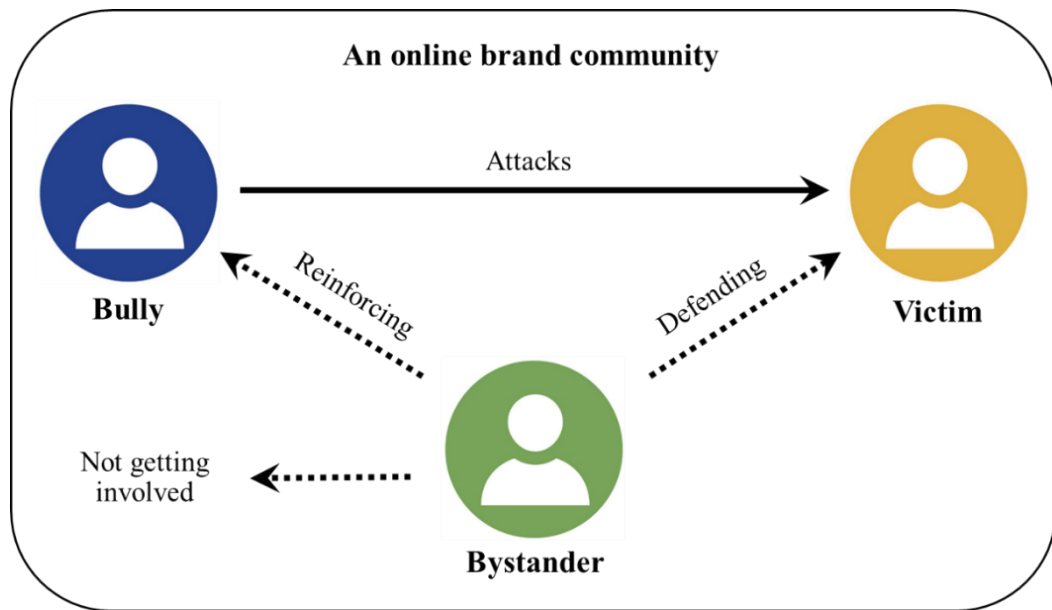


Figure 1.1 Victimisation process in online brand communities (Author 2020)

The example shows that these hostile comments were directed at the victim after posting a comment to support the brand, which also describes an online phenomenon that is defined in the thesis as ‘Brand Victimisation’ – the incident of a consumer who is bullied by a fellow brand follower in an online brand community and becomes a victim – which is the context of this research. However, the review of marketing literature indicates that the studies concerning inter-consumer hostility in online brand communities are limited. Interestingly, some key studies in the area such as studies by Breitsohl, Roschk, and Feyertag (2018) and Bacile et al. (2018) have applied a concept of cybervictimisation that is well-established in the psychology literature to the context of

online brand communities. Since there is a lack of empirical evidence on the consequences of being victimised in online brand communities in the marketing literature, this thesis therefore follows the approach used by Breitsohl, Roschk, and Feyertag (2018) and Bacile et al. (2018) by drawing on the conceptualisation and empirical evidence from cybervictimisation studies in the psychology literature. As such, ‘brand victimisation’ is termed and used throughout the thesis in order to emphasise the victimisation that occurs, in particular, in online brand communities. This is investigated in a brand context, instead of a general cybervictimisation context, that would occur elsewhere.

Different conceptualisations have been developed to provide understanding about inter-consumer hostility in online brand communities from different perspectives. For instance, Ewing et al. (2013) explored the rationale why consumers attack one another within and across online brand communities. Breitsohl, Roschk, and Feyertag (2018) further identified different types of consumer bullying behaviour. In a complaint-handling context, research indicates that being attacked in online brand communities can have detrimental impacts on brand followers. Bacile et al. (2018) highlight that a victim’s justice perceptions on how a company deals with a complaint are lower when companies ignore the victimisation incident compared to when companies address the incident. However, past research has overlooked the consequences of victimisation in online brand communities for brand- and community-related behaviours in particular. Moreover, past research has mainly investigated inter-consumer hostility from the bully’s perspective (e.g., why and how a brand follower attacks one another), whereas the victim’s perspective has received relatively less attention (e.g., how being bullied in online brand communities affects victims).

Chapter 1 starts by defining the research problem (section 1.2), then the research objectives and questions of the thesis are outlined (section 1.3), followed by the expected contributions to knowledge that the research will make (section 1.4). This is then followed

by an overview of the methodological approach taken within the thesis (section 1.5). After that, the data analysis techniques are briefly outlined (section 1.6). Ethical considerations of this research are then summarised (section 1.7). Finally, the chapter concludes by a discussion of the structure of the thesis (section 1.8), followed by a general conclusion of the whole chapter (section 1.9).

1.2 Research problem

While online brand communities are an important marketing channel for companies, brand followers have become more aggressive as researchers indicate a growing trend of cybervictimisation in online brand communities (Breitsohl, Roschk, and Feyertag 2018). Marketing scholars have already shown an increasing interest in research that links to brand victimisation in online brand communities (e.g., Bacile et al. 2018; Ilhan et al. 2018). However, research on this particular area is still lacking (Appel et al. 2020; Yadav and Pavlou 2014).

Since research on brand victimisation in online brand communities is relatively new, it has become somewhat fragmented with researchers tackling individual research questions around the reasons why and how brand followers attack one another. Consequently, there has not been a comprehensive assessment of what is known about the phenomenon and what remains unexplored. Moreover, consumer behaviour studies often cut across disciplinary boundaries and usually require knowledge across different disciplines such as Marketing and Psychology (Haugtvedt, Machleit, and Yalch 2005). As such, research in this area requires an assessment of key literature in the area to synthesise and summarise what is known about brand victimisation in online brand communities.

While past research offers substantive evidence that brand victimisation occurs within online brand communities (e.g., Breitsohl, Roschk, and Feyertag 2018; Dineva, Breitsohl, and Garrod 2017; Ewing, Wagstaff, and Powell 2013), these studies mainly rely on netnographic evidence (i.e., observations of online comments) and do not directly examine consequences concerning victim behaviours. Although previous research already highlights some potential negative impacts of being bullied in online brand communities such as justice perceptions (Bacile et al. 2018) and service climate (Bacile 2020), little is known about other consequences especially for victims and brands, as well as how victims respond to being bullied in online brand communities. As suggested by findings from cybervictimisation studies, there are situational factors that future research needs to consider when assessing the consequences of cybervictimisation such as victimisation severity (Camacho, Hassanein, and Head 2018) and reactions from bystanders (Slonje, Smith, and Friséen 2013). However, these situational factors have been overlooked in the online brand community research. Consequently, these present a challenge for scholars to shed light on how victims react to brand victimisation and on the negative outcomes of being bullied in online brand communities.

Therefore, a challenge of this thesis is to provide a comprehensive understanding of brand victimisation in online brand communities, as well as provide empirical evidence on the negative impact of brand victimisation on consumers and brands, making contributions to both marketing theory and practice. Thus, it requires a review of existing research in relation to the area, a synthesis and a summary of this research (Chapter 2), an empirical investigation of some of the emerging research issues including an identification of negative consequences of brand victimisation (Chapter 3) and an assessment of consumers' reaction to brand victimisation (Chapter 4).

1.3 Research importance and objectives

There are three major aspects that signify the importance of this thesis. First, as the research in the domain of cybervictimisation in online brand communities is limited and fragmented, it is important to synthesise the growing number of research studies around these themes. Importantly, having a literature review, synthesis and conceptualisation in this particular research area provides an assessment about what is known in a diverse and interdisciplinary area of enquiry and provides guidance for scholars about the conduct of further research in the area.

Second, past research highlights that negative C2C interactions in online brand communities can have detrimental impacts on brand followers and brands. Bacile et al. (2018) indicate that complainants who are attacked by other brand followers expect companies to address victimisation incidents that occur in their online brand communities, and that justice perceptions about how companies handle a complaint are lower when they ignore the incident compared to when they intervene. In contrast, past research also highlights the positive consequence of brand followers attacking one another in online brand communities. Ilhan et al. (2018) suggest that brand followers defending a brand and attacking those who support rival brands can also lead to positive consequences for the brand as it can lead to an increase in the volume of comments, and that enhances consumer engagement in online brand communities. These contradictory findings raise a question around the consequences of brand victimisation in online brand communities. Moreover, these studies also did not investigate how victimisation affects a victim's relationship with brands and online brand communities. Specifically, Bacile et al. (2018) focused on the outcomes concerning victim's attitudes towards how a company deals with the victimisation of a complainant and did not capture the outcomes outside a complaint-handling context. Ilhan et al. (2018) explore outcomes at the aggregate level, rather than investigating the impact on an individual. Consequently, this signifies a gap

in the extant knowledge about the effects of victimisation in online brand communities on brand and community-related behaviours.

In addition, as suggested by cybervictimisation research (Camacho, Hassanein, and Head 2018; Slonje, Smith, and Friséen 2013), situational factors such as victimisation severity and bystander reactions are worth examining when assessing the consequences of brand victimisation in online brand communities, which potentially provides more insights into the phenomenon. Since online brand communities are very important and useful marketing channels for companies (Beukeboom, Kerkhof, and de Vries 2015), it is crucial to identify the potential detrimental impact of brand victimisation in online brand communities on consumers and brands so that this can be mitigated.

Third, researchers suggest that how consumers perceive and respond to the negative events can either positively or negatively affect consumer outcomes (Breitsohl and Garrod 2016). Consumer studies have concentrated on how consumers cope with stressful situations such as product failure (Donoghue and De Klerk 2013) and service failure (Gabbott, Tsarenko, and Mok 2011; Sengupta, Balaji, and Krishnan 2015; Strizhakova, Tsarenko, and Ruth 2012). However, how consumers deal with inter-consumer hostility (i.e., being bullied in online brand communities) and how such reactions affect consumer attitude and behaviour have been overlooked. Considering that brand victimisation can cause some detrimental consequences for consumers and brands, an understanding of consumer's reactions to brand victimisation is important to help companies manage their online brand communities and mitigate negative consequences that might occur.

Hence, the three main research goals are:

1. To provide an integrative literature review on hostile interactions between consumers and indicate where brand victimisation fits in conceptually as part

of the interaction process. The thesis also aims to develop a conceptual model to explain the interaction process and identify areas for future research.

2. To examine the potential negative consequences of brand victimisation, as well as to investigate the impact of situational factors on such outcomes. It also aims to suggest how, and in what circumstance, companies should address brand victimisation that occurs in their online brand communities.
3. To provide a model that explains the process that brand followers go through when being bullied in online brand communities, as well as to suggest how the negative consequences of brand victimisation can be mitigated (e.g., a specific coping strategy that should be encouraged).

The thesis thus contributes to current knowledge on consumer behaviour in online brand communities by attempting to answer the following research questions:

- RQ1. What is known about inter-consumer hostility in online brand communities and what remains unexplored and needs to be investigated further? What theoretical model can help to conceptualise inter-consumer hostility as a marketing phenomenon?
- RQ2. What are the potential negative consequences of brand victimisation in online brand communities for victims and brands?
- RQ3. What process do victims undergo when coping with being bullied in online brand communities?

1.4 Expected contributions

This thesis aims to provide contributions to knowledge concerning the consequences of brand victimisation in online brand communities by conducting three independent studies. The findings of these studies will add new insights to the current

knowledge on consumer behaviour in online brand communities, which are expected to make the following theoretical and managerial contributions.

1.4.1 Theoretical contributions

This thesis will expand extant knowledge by focusing on the overlooked perspective of the victims. It contributes to marketing theory by integrating two interdisciplinary streams of research – online brand community research in marketing and cybervictimisation research in psychology – to shed light on the consequences of brand victimisation in online brand communities. Three independent studies that are embedded in this thesis thus aim to make the following theoretical contributions:

- The first study (Chapter 2) will delineate the domain of cybervictimisation in online brand communities. This is the first study to synthesise past research in the domain and will develop a conceptual framework to provide a roadmap for understanding the victimisation process that occurs in online brand communities and articulate factors that affect the victimisation process. Moreover, the framework will describe the construct of victimisation that should be considered when conducting research in the domain, help to identify research gaps and guide future research in the area.
- The second study (Chapter 3) will advocate the online phenomenon of cybervictimisation in psychology to the marketing discipline, arguing for the importance of studying brand victimisation in online brand communities as a critical phenomenon that negatively affects consumers and brands. This is the first study to provide empirical evidence on the negative impact of being bullied in online brand communities on brand- and community-related consequences, as well as develop new hypotheses around the interaction effects between

victimisation severity and bystander reactions upon such consequences, which are empirically assessed for the first time.

- The third study (Chapter 4) will develop a model about how consumers respond to being bullied in online brand communities, which is the first time that this has been conceptualised and empirically tested in an online brand community context. The study will provide empirical evidence on the negative psychological consequences of brand victimisation for victims and brands. The study will also put forward the significance of coping strategies that victims may use to cope with being bullied in online brand communities as an important construct on mitigating the negative outcomes of brand victimisation.

1.4.2 Managerial contributions

The findings of this thesis will also provide insights that have the potential to impact managerial thinking and practices, which include the following:

- To provide a better understanding of cybervictimisation in online brand communities and its negative impact for brands (Chapter 2)
- To provide the development of a conceptual framework to show the impact of brand victimisation on victim's perception and behavioural intentions towards brands, as well as empirical evidence to illustrate these effects (Chapter 3 and 4)
- To provide guidance on how, and in what circumstances, companies can mitigate the negative effects of brand victimisation that occurs in their online brand communities (Chapter 3 and 4).

1.5 Method

The underlying methodological philosophy behind two empirical studies (Chapter 3 and 4) follows the positivist rather than the interpretivist paradigm. In particular, a deductive approach was applied based on the notion that hypothesised relationships between studied variables can be developed based on the empirical evidence from past research, and such hypothesised relationships can be interpreted by a cause-effect relationship and verified by the statistical facts, which empowers the generalisation of the findings (Hudson and Ozanne 1988).

The literature review (Chapter 2) revealed that existing research in relation to brand victimisation in online brand communities relies on qualitative observations (i.e., observations of online comments) and does not directly measure its consequences (Breitsohl, Roschk, and Feyertag 2018; Dineva, Breitsohl, and Garrod 2017; Ewing et al. 2013). Consequently, outcomes of brand victimisation cannot be observed by analysing online commentary, which has been a gap in the marketing literature (Bacile et al. 2018; Ilhan et al. 2018). Furthermore, RQ2 and RQ3 also suggest a causal research design given the interest in i) establishing the impact of two independent variables (i.e., victimisation severity and bystander reactions) on three outcome variables (i.e., positive word-of-mouth intentions, community satisfaction, and community following intentions), and ii) establishing the mediation effects of two mediators (i.e., cognitive appraisal and coping strategy) on two outcome variables (i.e., negative well-being and perceived company accountability). Thus, these indicate the need for quantitative verification of these relationships.

To address RQ2, chapter 3 details a scenario-based experiment in which participants were randomly assigned to one of the scenarios prior to responding to questions in relation to the scenario they saw. Chapter 4 subsequently addresses RQ3 by using the same approach. Researchers have suggested scenario-based experiments as a

way to investigate inter-consumer hostility because hypothetical scenarios can be adjusted to fit different contexts or variables that potentially could be included in future studies (e.g., Adjei et al. 2016; Bacile et al. 2018). Bitner (1990) suggests that scenario experiments could make difficult manipulations more easily operationalised and provide researchers with the ability to control otherwise unmanageable variables. This method also allows participants to evaluate the same situation and respond to it under the same circumstances, as well as minimise bias in terms of memory lapse that may confound a more natural scenario (McCollough, Berry, and Yadav 2000; Smith and Bolton 1998).

However, there is a limitation to the scenario-based experimental design as the experiment still requires participants to imagine themselves in the hypothetical situation, thus ‘realism’ is a key limitation of this method (Kim and Jang 2014). Following previous research (e.g., Breitsohl and Garrod 2016; Gao et al. 2013), scenarios were designed in close relation to real-life situations taken from online brand communities on Facebook to increase the realism. A pre-test was conducted prior to the actual data collection to ensure participants perceived the manipulations as intended, as suggested by van Noort and Willemsen (2012). Moreover, participants were asked to rate the realism of the scenarios to ensure the scenarios were viewed as realistic. Furthermore, as suggested by Barratt, Ferris, and Lenton (2015), a purposive sampling approach was adopted and a screening criteria was utilised at the beginning of the survey targeting participants who are brand followers and used to be victims in the past in order to minimise bias that might be caused by participants’ past experience. A participant who used to be a victim might perceive the hypothetical scenario as more realistic than a participant who has never been a victim.

More details on the experimental design, data collection procedure, characteristics of samples and measurement scale items are presented in the method section of Chapter 3 and 4.

1.6 Analysis

To address RQ2, most of the analysis used in chapter 3 involved comparing means between groups. One-way ANOVA was used to test differences across experimental conditions (i.e., severe victimisation, mild victimisation and a control group). Moreover, two-way MANCOVA was adopted to explore interaction effects of two independent variables (i.e., victimisation severity and bystander reactions) on dependent variables (i.e., positive word-of-mouth intentions, community satisfaction, and community following intentions). Chapter 4 addresses RQ3 by using the PROCESS Macro for SPSS (Hayes 2018) to examine moderating and mediating effects of the studied variables. Specifically, the study develops serial multiple mediation models in order to test the mediation effects of two mediators simultaneously, with one mediator being a cause of the other. Other analysis techniques such as exploratory factor analysis (EFA) and reliability tests using Cronbach's alpha were used for measurement validation. Further detail on analysis procedures can be found in the respective chapters.

1.7 Ethical considerations

Because the research and data collection involves human participants, ethical standards and practices were adhered to from the Research Ethics Committee at Kent Business School, including confidentiality and anonymity of data (see Appendix 1A). The research was granted ethical approval by the Kent Business School Research Ethics Committee on March 3, 2019 (KBSE No: 1205) and the research was conducted within these parameters.

1.8 Thesis structure

This thesis follows a three-paper format in which the papers make up the main body of the thesis and are written in a format that they can be submitted to target journals. Each paper can be read and understood independently and makes its own individual contribution to knowledge. The three-paper format allows more concentration and manageability towards conducting the research as the author can tailor the identified research gaps to the author's research interests, and operationalise the studies independently. The structure of this thesis is as follows:

Chapter 1: Introduction

The first chapter introduces the overall topic and motivations to undertake the research. It outlines research problems, research questions, as well as research objectives. It also highlights expected theoretical and managerial contributions that the research will make, as well as presents an overview of the methodological approach taken within the thesis.

Chapter 2: Paper 1 – ‘Inter-consumer hostility in online brand communities: A conceptual framework and an agenda for future research’

The second chapter addresses RQ1 and synthesises existing research in relation to brand victimisation in online brand communities. It identifies research gaps and provides a conceptual framework based on five major research streams that guide future research in the domain of brand victimisation in online brand communities.

Chapter 3: Paper 2 – ‘If it's bad, don't pretend it didn't happen! Exploring the outcomes of victimisation and bystander reactions in online brand communities’

The third chapter addresses RQ2 and some research issues that are presented in chapter 2. It examines the interaction effects of victimisation severity and

bystander reactions on some potential negative consequences of being bullied in online brand communities. The procedure used to collect primary data with appropriate analysis techniques is described. The results and discussion around the interaction effects between victimisation severity and bystander reactions upon outcomes of brand victimisation are presented. Finally, it shows how these findings contribute to marketing theory and practices by providing novel insights on the negative impact of being bullied in online brand communities on brand- and community-related consequences, as well as provides guidance on how companies can mitigate such negative effects.

Chapter 4: Paper 3 – ‘Understanding consumer reactions to being bullied in online brand communities: The mediating role of cognitive appraisal and coping strategy’

The fourth chapter addresses RQ3, as well as some research issues identified in chapter 2. The study tests hypotheses around the negative psychological consequences of brand victimisation and different coping strategies that victims may adopt when responding to being bullied in online brand communities. Lastly, it explains how the findings contribute to marketing theory and practice by providing models that explain the process that the victims go through when being bullied in online brand communities, as well as providing guidance on how companies can tackle brand victimisation in order to mitigate the negative effects that potentially occurs.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

The last chapter provides a summary about how the results of each paper are related and link the theoretical and managerial contributions from each paper thematically into a cohesive whole. It also summarises the limitations

of the research and provides guidance for future research to enhance knowledge in the domain of brand victimisation in online brand communities.

1.9 Conclusion

This chapter provides an overview of the thesis, as well as outlining research problems, research objectives and research questions, which will be addressed in the subsequent chapters. The next chapter (Chapter 2) will address RQ1, aiming to provide an integrative literature review on hostile interactions between consumers and indicating where brand victimisation fits in conceptually as part of the interaction process, as well as developing a conceptual model to explain interaction process and identify areas needed for future development.

Appendix 1A. Ethics Review Checklist for Research with Human Participants

| Section I: Project details | |
|--------------------------------------|--|
| Project title: | Consumer reactions to negative comments from other consumers on Social Media |
| Proposed data collection start date: | 22/03/19 NB: The data collection start date must be at least 10 working days from when this form is submitted. Ethical approval cannot be granted retrospectively. |
| Planned data collection end date: | 15/04/19 |

| Section II: Student details | | | | |
|---|---|---|-------------|----------|
| Student name: | | Nuttakon Ounvorawong | | |
| University of Kent e-mail: | | no205@kent.ac.uk | | |
| Programme title: | | PhD Marketing | | |
| Module Code (taught programmes): | | | | |
| Module Convenor: | | | | |
| Student Declaration | | | | |
| <p>I am satisfied that all ethical issues have been identified and that satisfactory procedures are in place to deal with those issues in this research project.</p> <p>I confirm that I will follow appropriate risk assessment procedures for projects involving fieldwork, lone working and/or data collection outside the UK.</p> <p>I will abide by the procedures described in this form.</p> | | | | |
| Student signature: | Please Tick: <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | By ticking this box I acknowledge I am electronically signing this application. Failure to tick this box will be considered an unsigned application and will be returned. | Date | 20/02/19 |

| Section III: Principal Investigator Declaration | | | | |
|--|---|--|-------------|------------|
| Principal Investigator name: | | Dr Jan Breitsohl | | |
| <p>I agree to comply, and will ensure that all researchers involved with the study comply with the University of Kent policies and appropriate professional ethical guidelines during the conduct of this research project</p> <p>If any significant changes are made to the design of the research I will notify the KBS REAG and understand that further review may be required before I can proceed to implement the change(s)</p> <p>I agree that I will notify the KBS REAG of any complaints I receive in connection with this research project</p> <p>I am satisfied that all ethical issues have been identified and that satisfactory procedures are in place to deal with those issues in this research project</p> <p>I confirm that I will follow risk assessment procedures for projects involving fieldwork, lone working and/or data collection outside the UK</p> <p>I will abide by the procedures described in this form</p> | | | | |
| Principal Investigator signature: | Please Tick: <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | By ticking this box I acknowledge I am electronically signing this application. Failure to tick this box will be considered an unsigned application and will be returned. | Date | 25/02/2019 |
| KBS REAG Chair Signature: | Please Tick: <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | By ticking this box I acknowledge I am electronically signing and confirming the decision below. | Date | |

| | |
|--|---|
| KBS REAG Chair decision: (delete as applicable) | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Project approved <input type="checkbox"/> KBS full review required <input type="checkbox"/> Refer to University Research Governance Officer for advice <input type="checkbox"/> Refer to KBS Health and Safety representative <input type="checkbox"/> Not approved |
| KBS REAG Chair Feedback: | |

| |
|---|
| Section IV: Project Description |
| 1. Summary of research (100 words maximum): |
| The project is investigating the consequences of how consumers react to negative comments made toward them on Facebook because of the brands they support. Specifically, we are looking at how these comments affect consumer's brand relationship (e.g. do they remain loyal to the brand), consumer's brand community relationship (e.g. do they stop coming back to the community), and consumer's perceived Internet satisfaction (e.g. do they enjoy being online less). |
| 2. Description of participants who will be recruited (50 words maximum): |
| The participants will reflect the demographics of the adult US Internet population aged over 18, with any ethnicity, occupation, and educational level. |
| 3. Description of the methods for recruiting participants, gathering data / information (e.g. interviews, questionnaire surveys etc.) and storing the data securely (100 words maximum): |
| Data will be collected via online questionnaires using Qualtrics. Pilot test sampling will be done via posting a survey on selected online discussion forums related to brands. All responses will be confidential and anonymous. No identifiable personal information will be collected. Data will be stored securely on a private computer that is protected via security systems and will only use the university wifi network and personal home network. |
| 4. Description of proposed location(s) and timings for data collection (e.g. day/evening/weekend) if the project involves collecting data from participants in person (e.g. interviews, focus groups) (50 words maximum): |
| This project will not require collecting data in person. |

| | | |
|--|--------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Section Va: Research Ethics Checklist | | |
| <i>If you answered yes to any of the questions in this section, please complete a Full Ethical Review Application form (available via Moodle).</i> | YES | NO |
| 5. Are drugs, placebos or other substances (e.g. food substances, vitamins) to be administered to the study participants or will the study involve invasive, intrusive or potentially harmful procedures of any kind? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> |
| 6. Will financial inducements (other than reasonable expenses and compensation for time) be offered to participants? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> |
| 7. Could the study induce psychological stress or anxiety or cause harm or negative consequences beyond the risks encountered in normal life? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> |
| 8. Is pain or more than mild discomfort likely to result from the study? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> |
| 9. Is there a possibility that the safety of the researcher may be in question (e.g. international research; locally employed research assistants)? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> |
| 10. Does the research involve participants carrying out any of the research activities themselves (i.e. acting as researchers as opposed to just being participants)? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> |
| 11. Are there any possible conflicts of interest with the proposed research/research findings (e.g. Is the researcher working for the organisation under research or does the research/research findings cause a risk of harm to the participant(s) or the researcher(s) or the institution; is there any benefit for the researcher (e.g. financially)?) | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> |
| 12. Does the research have the potential to radicalise people who are vulnerable to supporting terrorism or becoming terrorists themselves? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> |
| 13. Will it be possible to link identities or information back to individual participants? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> |

| | | |
|---|--------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| 14. Will the research involve data collection via online, electronic (skype, hand held recorder/phone) or other visual/vocal methods where respondents may be identified but the source recording is not deleted after transcription? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> |
| 15. Will the research involve administrative or secure data that requires permission from the appropriate authorities before use? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> |
| Section Vb: Research Ethics Checklist | | |
| <i>If you answered yes to any of the questions in this section, please complete: a Full Ethical Review Application form (available on Moodle) a Data Protection Impact Assessment form (DPIA) (available on Moodle)</i> | YES | NO |
| 16. Will any activities in this project involve participants who are vulnerable or unable to give informed written consent or in a dependent position (e.g. people under 18, people with learning difficulties, cognitive impairment, illiteracy, groups or people in care facilities)? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> |
| 17. Will any research activities in this project involve discussion of sensitive topics (e.g. sexual activity, self-image, drug use, ethnicity, political activism, whistleblowing, redundancy, potentially illegal activities) which is recorded and stored? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> |
| 18. Will participants be expected to take part in any research without their consent or knowledge at the time (e.g. covert observation of people in non-public places, or within their working environment; ethnographic research), and / or will deception of any sort be used? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> |
| 19. Will the research involve the sharing of data or confidential information beyond the initial consent given? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> |
| 20. Could participants be compelled to participate in your study? (e.g. an employer ordering them to participate in the study; employment status; family relations or other dependencies) | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> |
| 21. Does the project involve the collection of material that could be considered of a sensitive, personal, biographical, medical, psychological, social, physiological nature or biometric (interview recordings which are not going to be deleted after transcription, fingerprints etc.). | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> |

| | | |
|---|--------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Section VI: Security-Sensitive Material Agreement | YES | NO |
| 22. Does your research involve access to or use of security-sensitive material covered by the Terrorism Act? (The Terrorism Act (2006) outlaws the dissemination of records, statements and other documents that can be interpreted as promoting or endorsing terrorist acts. By answering 'yes', you are registering your legitimate use of this material with the Research Ethics Advisory Group. In the event of a police investigation this registration will help you to demonstrate that your use of this material is legitimate and lawful.) Click here for more information. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> |

| | | |
|--|--------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Section VII: Identifying Potential Risks and Hazards – Project Supervisor to complete | | |
| Fieldwork <i>See here for University guidance:</i> http://www.kent.ac.uk/safety/hs/pages/fieldwork/guidance_on_health_and_safety_in_fieldwork.pdf | YES | NO |
| 23. Does this project involve fieldwork or meeting participants to collect data at a location other than the University of Kent? If 'NO', go straight to B (Overseas Travel). | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> |
| 24. Are the proposed location(s) for data collection already familiar to the researcher? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 25. Are the proposed location(s) for data collection either a public space (e.g. shopping centre café, airport during opening hours) or work environment (e.g. office, shop, factory during operational hours) where the researcher can reasonably expect basic security measures to exist for visitors? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 26. Will the researcher travel to the proposed location(s) using their own transport or a familiar public transport route? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 27. Does the researcher need formal permission to collect data in the proposed location(s)? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

| | | |
|--|--------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Overseas Travel <i>See here for University guidance:</i> http://www.kent.ac.uk/safety/hs/pages/travel-work-overseas/travel-work-overseas.html | YES | NO |
| 28. Does the data collection take place outside the UK? If 'NO', go straight to C (Lone Working). | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> |
| 29. Is the proposed data collection country also the researcher's home country? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 30. Will data collection take place during a University vacation, as part of a visit home to see friends or family? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 31. Will the researcher be resident overnight with family or friends during the data collection period? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| C. Lone Working <i>See link for guidance:</i> http://www.kent.ac.uk/safety/hs/pages/loneworking/loneworkingperfstandard.html | YES | NO |
| 32. Will the researcher conduct data collection alone at off campus locations, or on campus during evenings or weekends? If NO, go straight to D (Mitigation of Risk) | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> |
| 33. Will data collection take place in public during the normal operational hours of the proposed location(s)? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 34. Will a friend or family member be aware of the researcher's location and proposed time of return during the data collection process? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 35. Will the researcher be contactable by mobile phone or in person throughout the data collection process? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 36. Will data collection take place in a public or work environment where the researcher will be observable throughout the data collection process? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| D. Mitigation of Risk 37. If you have answered 'NO' to any questions (excluding questions 23, 28 and 32) in Section VII, please ensure that you provide full details of the proposed measures to mitigate each of the risks identified. Please complete the box with N/A if appropriate. | | |
| N/A | | |
| E. Insurance/Indemnity 38. Does UoK's insurer need to be notified about your project before insurance cover can be provided? Please give details below. <i>The majority of research carried out at UoK is covered automatically by existing policies, however, if your project entails more than usual risk or involves an overseas country in the developing world or where there is or has recently been conflict, please check with the Insurance Office that cover can be provided. Please give details below.</i> Please complete the box with N/A if appropriate. | | |
| N/A | | |

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Chapter 2: Inter-Consumer Hostility in Online Brand Communities: A Conceptual Framework and an Agenda for Future Research

Abstract

Although there has been an increasing trend of consumers being bullied by other consumers within online brand communities, most companies do not address such hostile interactions. Whilst the volume of research in this area has been increasing in the marketing literature a framework is lacking that provides companies with a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon. Extant literature on inter-consumer hostility in online brand communities is fragmented as past studies focus on the phenomenon from different perspectives.

This study adopts the approach of an integrative literature review to assess the published literature in relation to hostile interactions between consumers in online brand communities. Lasswell's model of communication (Lasswell 1948) is used as a guiding theory to organise the literature review and conceptualise hostile consumer-to-consumer interaction process. The study offers a conceptual framework that helps to provide a comprehensive understanding of inter-consumer hostility in online brand communities. The study contributes to the online brand community literature by showing the current state of research in the area, identifying research gaps and offering avenues for future research.

Keywords: Consumer misbehaviour; Consumer interactions; Consumer hostility; Online community; Social media; Brands

2.1 Introduction

Marketing scholarship has seen increased interest in consumer hostility within an online brand community, where a consumer is bullied by another consumer and becomes a victim within the online brand community (Dineva, Breitsohl, and Garrod 2017; Ewing, Wagstaff, and Powell 2013). An online brand community such as Nike's official brand community on Facebook is a place where such incidents have been observed. Figure 2.1 illustrates an incident of bullying between consumers that occurred on Nike's online brand community (Nike 2018).



Figure 2.1 Example of bullying between consumers on Nike's online brand community
(Nike 2018)

Although hostile interactions between consumers tend to cause some negative consequences, research shows that most companies did not address such hostile interactions between brand followers that occurred in their hosted online brand communities (Bacile et al. 2018). Why? Currently there is no such framework which can assist managers to understand the hostile interaction process and its impact on those who are bullied and the brands. Development of such a framework will help managers respond to such negative incidents in their own brand communities by highlighting the key variables to consider and by showing when and in what circumstances they impact important brand related metrics. Hence, the articulation of such a framework is the goal of this study. The framework aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon and highlight an importance of addressing such hostile interactions between consumers.

Various conceptualisations have been developed to provide a better understanding of the inter-consumer hostility that occurs in online brand communities and researchers have approached this online phenomenon from different perspectives. For instance, Ewing, Wagstaff, and Powell (2013) explore the reasons why brand followers attack one another within and across online brand communities. Breitsohl, Roschk, and Feyertag (2018) further identify different types of consumer hostility based on cyberbullying concepts. Dineva, Breitsohl, and Garrod (2017) explore management strategies that companies can use to handle conflicts between consumers in online brand communities. However, there has not been a comprehensive assessment of what is known about inter-consumer hostility in online brand communities and what remains unexplored. Given that inter-consumer hostility can cause a detrimental impact on consumers and brands (Bacile et al. 2018), it is important to summarise the theoretical foundation and empirical findings to provide a better understanding of the phenomenon. Moreover, literature in this particular topic area is fragmented and the research domain cuts across disciplinary

boundaries. Therefore, there is a need to synthesise what the previous research in the area can tell researchers.

Online brand communities are growing in popularity and usage globally and are increasingly being used by brand followers to communicate with the brand. A statistical report shows that more than half of global internet users have followed brands on social media (Statusbrew 2019). Synthesising what is known and assessing the state of knowledge in the area will help to develop a conceptual framework about the interaction process of such inter-consumer hostility. The framework will help to overcome the omissions and deficiencies of fragmented research on inter-consumer hostility, as well as to provide avenues for future research in this area. Therefore, to address the research issues and provide a better understanding on the topic, the study follows an integrative literature review approach as it allows an integration of perspectives and insights from research in different fields (Snyder 2019).

Lasswell's model of communication (Lasswell 1948) is adopted as a guiding theory to organise a literature review and develop a conceptual model on inter-consumer hostility in online brand communities. Lasswell (1948, p. 216) suggests that a communication process can be described by following the 5W model, which is "Who, Says what, In which channel, To whom, With what effect" as shown in Figure 2.2. This model is appropriate to be adapted to an inter-consumer hostility paradigm because it outlines a communication process that encompasses all the components of consumer-to-consumer (C2C) interactions in online brand communities. Building on Lasswell's model of communication, the hostile interaction process between consumers can be divided into five parts including a bully (Who), a hostile message (Says what), an online brand community (In which channel), a victim (To whom) and the consequences (With what effect). The study proposes these steps to provide a meaningful framework for the literature on inter-consumer hostility.

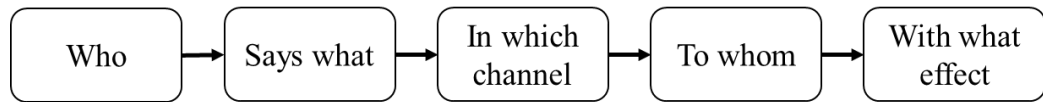


Figure 2.2 Lasswell's model of communication (Lasswell 1948)

The present study contributes to the online brand community literature and to the ongoing development of the research about inter-consumer hostility within online brand communities. It does this through a synthesis of the current state of knowledge, an outline of the scope of the topic, and the developing of a conceptual framework to provide a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon. Moreover, the framework offers new insights for companies by providing a better understanding about inter-consumer hostility in online brand communities and its negative impact for brands. Because online brand communities are very important and useful marketing channels for companies (Beukeboom, Kerkhof, and de Vries 2015), it is important to understand the process when a consumer attacks one another, as well as the detrimental outcomes that would negatively affect brands. As such, companies need to be aware of such negative consequences, so that they can be mitigated.

The study begins by discussing the general concept of inter-consumer hostility, identifying five steps to conduct an integrative review based on Lasswell's model of communication (Lasswell 1948). It then synthesises the research and develops a conceptual framework, followed by an outline of extant research gaps and a research agenda to offer a platform for further discussion in the area.

2.2 Conceptualising inter-consumer hostility in online brand communities

Hostility is generally defined as “a negative attitude toward one or more people that is reflected in a decidedly unfavourable judgment of the target” (Berkowitz 1993, p.

21). Hostility is motivated by attitudes and emotions, which then drive the aggressive behaviour of individuals (Eckhardt, Norlander, and Deffenbacher 2004). Smith (1994, p. 26) described hostility as a trait that indicates “a devaluation of the worth and motives of others, an expectation that others are likely sources of wrongdoing, a relational view of being in opposition toward others, and a desire to inflict harm or see others harmed”.

Past consumer research has typically viewed inter-consumer hostility as a form of verbal aggression reflected in language content and communication style with intentions to harm others (Yagil 2017). Bacile et al. (2018) investigated inter-consumer hostility through the phenomenon of consumers verbally attacking one another in an online brand community, which is referred to as ‘C2C incivility’ (see also Bacile 2020; Bacile et al. 2020). Moreover, inter-consumer hostility also occurs in the form of conflict between consumers, which is referred to as ‘C2C conflicts’ – an online phenomenon in which consumers verbally attack one another in relation to a brand (Dineva, Breitsohl, and Garrod 2017; Dineva et al. 2020; Husemann, Ladstaetter, and Luedicke 2015). C2C conflicts involve the intention of a consumer to harm, provoke, or harass other consumers (Ewing, Wagstaff, and Powell 2013). Furthermore, inter-consumer hostility can be seen in a form of ‘inter-consumer brand rivalry’ (Berendt, Uhrich, and Thompson 2018). The rivalry between consumers includes heated discussion, trash talk, and insult between fans of opposing brands (e.g., Apple vs Samsung, McDonald's vs Burger King, Coke vs Pepsi) (Hickman and Ward 2007; Ilhan, Kübler, and Pauwels 2018).

These forms of inter-consumer hostility are generally related to notions of cyberbullying and cybervictimisation, which are well-established in the psychology literature. Cyberbullying is a form of online aggression that is simply described as “the use of electronic communication technologies to bully others” (Kowalski et al. 2014, p. 1074). In comparison, cybervictimisation is a slightly different concept from cyberbullying in that it describes a bullying process from the perspective of the victim.

Alvarez-García et al. (2017) defined cybervictimisation as being the target of threatening, offensive, or hostile messages/comments through the Internet. Building on the cyberbullying concept, inter-consumer hostility can also be related to an incident when brand followers bully one another in online brand communities, which refers to ‘consumer brand bullying behaviour’ (Breitsohl, Roschk, and Feyertag 2018). Moreover, past research has already provided evidence of trolling, a type of bullying behaviours, that occurs in online brand communities (Golf-Papez and Veer 2017).

Although there are some overlaps across these concepts on consumer behaviours and differences in the terminology used, the main behaviour of when a brand follower is verbally attacked by other brand followers in a hostile manner, and on a personal level, is the key concept for the research in this area. The following sections aim to provide a better understanding of inter-consumer hostility in online brand communities, which will help future studies to have a clear context of the phenomenon being investigated.

2.3 Review and synthesis method

This study follows an integrative approach to review literature in the area. Since inter-consumer hostility in online brand communities is still an emerging topic (Appel et al. 2020), the purposes of this integrative review are to assess, critique and synthesise the literature on inter-consumer hostility in order to develop a preliminary conceptualisation and a conceptual framework, rather than review old models or develop a re-conceptualisation (Torraco 2005). As the research in this particular topic area is scarce and fragmented, an integrative literature review is an appropriate approach because it allows an integration of perspectives and insights from research in different fields (Synder 2019).

The literature review summarises published articles that focus on inter-consumer hostility, as conceptualised in the previous section. The review excludes studies with a

focus on negative word-of-mouth (NWOM) (e.g., Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004; Ranaweera and Jayawardhena 2014). Negative word-of-mouth usually stems from dissatisfied product or service experiences or corporate misconduct (Kuchmaner, Wiggins, and Grimm 2019; Romani, Grappi, and Bagozzi 2013). As such, the rationale for those who spread NWOM is to warn other consumers, harm the company, get help from others, or receive reimbursement from the company (Breitsohl, Khammash, and Griffiths 2014; Gelbrich and Roschk 2011). In contrast, the motive behind inter-consumer hostility is to harm or threaten others on a personal level (Breitsohl, Roschk, and Feyertag 2018).

To organise a literature review, Lasswell's model of communication (Lasswell 1948) is adopted as a guiding theory to review existing literature on inter-consumer hostility. The model is a commonly used framework in marketing research to study the process of communication between consumers (Cheung and Thadani 2012; Danaher and Rossiter 2011; Sundermann and Raabe 2019). Following the model, the literature review is divided into five parts including: (1) Who, (2) Says what, (3) In which channel, (4) To whom and (5) With what effect, which are presented in the subsequent sections.

2.4 Who – The bully

This section reviews literature that focuses on the perspective of a consumer who initiates a hostile action (i.e., a bully), which summarises four possible antecedents of inter-consumer hostility. First, inter-consumer hostility can be influenced by brand rivalry, an inter-group rivalry between rival brands. A survey of rivalry between members of different communities (i.e., Apple vs PC, Iowa vs Purdue) indicates that members who strongly identified with online brand communities are more likely to engage in inter-group stereotyping, which further influences members of one brand to attack members of a rival brand (Hickman and Ward 2007). Based on a 12-month netnographic investigation of online brand communities of two rival brands (i.e., Ford vs Holden), Ewing, Wagstaff,

and Powell (2013) further show that rivalry between online brand communities is often caused by oppositional loyalty. Likewise, a content analysis on the online brand communities of brand rivals (e.g., Apple vs Samsung, Coke vs Pepsi, Nike vs Adidas) by Ilhan, Kübler, and Pauwels (2018) shows that marketing communications such as promoting new products on social media can influence fans of two rival brands to attack one another within and across the online brand communities.

Second, researchers have suggested that conflict culture could lead consumers to be hostile. Husemann, Ladstaetter, and Luedicke (2015) show that the conflict culture within an online brand community can also trigger hostility that occurs between members of the same community, especially when the group norms are violated. For example, conflicts between members of the same community can emerge from different perspectives about social and cultural brand values, the symbolic meaning of the community or consumer ideologies. These antecedents develop a conflict culture that shapes inter-consumer hostility.

Third, an investigation of C2C interactions in Hummer's online brand community by Luedicke et al. (2010) indicates that heterogeneity within the community could also influence hostile behaviour of consumers. Interviews of community members show that differences in ideological beliefs and values could create tension within the online brand community, which then influence hostile interactions between community members. For instance, members who felt that they are more knowledgeable would turn hostile toward others. Thomas, Price, and Schau (2013) further support that heterogeneity within online brand communities can create conflicts between community members, and is likely to decrease their intention to continue using online brand communities. Bacile et al. (2018) highlight that making a complaint through online brand communities creates an opportunity for hostile interactions between a complainant and other community members. Some community members may resist negative information from complainants

due to different views of the members who have complained (Ahluwalia, Burnkrant, and Unnava 2000).

Finally, related research in Psychology suggests that hostility can be generally triggered by individuals' personal factors. Pabian, De Backer, and Vandebosch (2015) highlight that dark personality traits (e.g., tendencies for Machiavellianism and Psychopathy) could influence the hostile behaviour of individuals.

2.5 Says what - Types of hostile behaviour

As consumers attacking one another can be seen in various forms, this section identifies different types of hostile actions that consumers may perform. Ewing, Wagstaff, and Powell (2013) examine different forms of hostile C2C interactions between rival brands. The findings show that rivalry between online brand communities can be seen in different forms including humour, epithets, ridicule, malice and hostility. Breitsohl, Roschk, and Feyertag (2018) further conducted a netnographic investigation of four online brand communities on Facebook (Burger King, Domino's Pizza, Dolce & Gabbana and Starbucks) over a sixteen month period. Six different types of 'consumer brand bullying behaviour' were revealed and categorised into three categories including hostile intent, non-hostile intent, and ambiguous intent. Hostile intent contains harassment, trolling, and ostracism, whereas non-hostile intent consists of criticism and teasing. An additional category, ambiguous intent, is represented by camouflage. Researchers also highlight that harassment is the most common type that typically occurs in online brand communities. The definitions of each behaviour are presented in Table 2.1. In addition, Golf-Papez and Veer (2017) show evidence of trolling, a type of bullying behaviours that often occurs in online brand communities, as well as provide the conceptual model of the manifestation of consumer trolling behaviours.

Table 2.1 Definitions for consumer brand bullying behaviours (Breitsohl, Roschk, and Feyertag 2018, p. 296)

| Type | Definition |
|------------|---|
| Harassment | A consumer posts an abusive message with the intent to ridicule or degrade a specific brand or brand supporter |
| Trolling | A consumer posts a seemingly pointless or out-of-place message to provoke one or more brand supporters |
| Ostracism | The brand community as a whole ignores the communication of a specific consumer |
| Criticism | A consumer posts an opinion or piece of information that contradicts a brand or brand supporter without any hostile intent |
| Teasing | A consumers posts a humorous message about a brand or brand supporter which is meant to be friendly and to cause joint laughter |
| Camouflage | A consumer posts a message which contains both hostile and friendly elements so that the intent remains ambiguous to brand supporters |

As past findings already show, different types of consumer hostile behaviour, taking account of the type of behaviour being investigated, is important for future research because different behaviours would lead to different consequences. Providing a clear context of the phenomenon being investigated (i.e., the type of hostile interaction) will allow researchers to distinguish the focal phenomenon from other related concepts.

In addition, research indicates that the degree to which the hostile action is performed is also a thing to be considered. Findings from cybervictimisation research suggest that degree of severity is a situational factor that future research needs to consider when assessing the impact of hostile interactions between consumers (Kowalski et al. 2014). Ortega et al. (2009) indicate that encountering severe victimisation leads to a higher level of stress and depression than experiencing mild victimisation. In the same way, Camacho, Hassanein, and Head (2018) show that victims reported higher anxiety and lower satisfaction towards Facebook when the victimisation was perceived as severe compared to mild. This research thus indicates that the more severe a cybervictimisation

event is perceived by victims, the higher the negative impact on them. Likewise, future research in the area of inter-consumer hostility can apply this notion when investigating the negative effects of such hostile behaviour that can vary by different degrees of severity.

While past studies show that consumers may attack one another in different forms and with different degrees of severity, the impact of these different actions has been overlooked in the literature. This is an important area of research because people may perceive the same action differently (Lazarus 1982). Distinguishing between different forms of hostile interactions, as well as different degrees of severity, is significant for research in the area because consumers may perceive C2C hostility differently; for instance, a hostile comment can be hurtful for some, but harmless for others and indeed be normal behaviour in the community.

2.6 In which channel – Online brand communities

Research provides evidence that inter-consumer hostility occurs within online brand communities on social media especially on Facebook (e.g., Bacile et al. 2018; Breitsohl, Roschk, and Feyertag 2018; Dineva, Breitsohl, and Garrod 2017; Dineva et al. 2020; Ewing, Wagstaff, and Powell 2013; Ilhan, Kübler, and Pauwels 2018). Recent statistical reports highlight that Facebook is the most popular social media platform with the largest number of daily active users of over 2.4 billion (Smart Insights 2020), and is the most popular social media platform for online brand communities rated by companies (Statista 2020).

Importantly, one of the distinct characteristics of online brand communities on social media is that it pulls consumers together and allows them to interact with each other easily, facilitating a higher degree of interactional dynamics between consumers. As such, inter-consumer hostility generally occurs between multiple consumers, which

seems similar to cybervictimisation as it generally involves multiple parties (bullies, victims and bystanders) (Slonje, Smith, and Frisé 2013). According to Salmivalli et al. (1996), the term bystander refers to an observer who witnesses the incident, and may decide to act as a bully's supporter (e.g., assisting, laughing or cheering), a victim's defender (e.g., defending the victim or telling the bullies to stop), or doing nothing and not taking sides with anyone. The impact of bystander reactions on the victims can be either positive or negative depending on the role of the bystanders. For instance, when the bystander supports the bully, it can lead to more negative consequences such as higher frequency of victimisation (Salmivalli, Voeten, and Poskiparta 2011), making the bully become more aggressive (Pepler, Craig, and O'Connell 2010), and causing the victims higher anxiety and depression (Salmivalli 2010). In contrast, the victim's defender can buffer the negative outcomes caused by the victimisation (Sainio et al. 2010; Salmivalli 2010).

As researchers have shown the distinct characteristic of online brand communities, future research should assess hostile C2C interactions as a group process; for instance, by taking the roles of other consumers within the same online brand community (i.e., bystander) into account when investigating the impact of such hostile interactions on consumers.

2.7 To whom – The victim

This section reviews studies that focused on the perspective of consumers who are attacked and become victims. Research suggests that identity-central factors such as physical appearance (e.g., weight and skin colour), socio-demographic background (e.g., race and sexual orientation), or personal belief systems (e.g., political and religious) could lead a consumer to become a target of cyberbullying (Costello et al. 2016). In addition, as shown by consumer research such as Breitsohl, Roschk and Feyertag (2018), brands

present a similar identity-central factor that leads to an individual becoming the target of interpersonal hostility similar to what have been reported in cybervictimisation research. As brands are important to individual's self-concept, people tend to identify, use, and form stronger relationships with brands that have characteristics relating to themselves (Stokburger-Sauer, Ratneshwar, and Sen 2012).

Past studies further show that a consumer who makes a complaint through an online brand community may get attacked and become a victim by other brand followers who resist negative information from the complainant or want to protect the brand they like (Bacile et al. 2018; Bacile 2020; Bacile et al. 2020). Moreover, research shows that consumers may become victimised because they post comments to support their favourite brands and get attacked by the fans of rival brands (Ilhan et al. 2018). Although existing studies already highlight some potential brand-related behaviours that cause a consumer to become victimised such as posting a complaint or making a comment to support the brand on social media, little is known about how victims perceive being bullied in online brand communities and how they respond to such hostile behaviours. This raises a challenge for scholars to shed light on consumer behaviours from the perspective of victims, which has been overlooked in the literature (Breitsohl, Roschk, and Feyertag 2018).

Past cybervictimisation studies have identified various types of coping that victims may use to deal with cybervictimisation. For instance, retaliation (i.e., returning hostile messages to the bully) is a common strategy that victims usually employ when being bullied (Kochenderfer-Ladd and Skinner 2002; Machmutow et al. 2012). Victims may also adopt an avoidance strategy rather than trying to do something against the bully (Na et al. 2015). Existing findings also highlight that even the same coping strategies could lead to different outcomes. For instance, some studies indicate that victims who used retaliation strategies to cope with cybervictimisation were more likely to experience

high depression (Machmutow et al. 2012), whereas some studies argue that retaliation could buffer the negative effects of cybervictimisation as it counters the negative emotions effectively or even puts the victimisation incident to an end (Beran and Li 2007). Likewise, future studies may adopt these concepts to assess how victims respond to inter-consumer hostility through different coping strategies, and how such strategies buffer the negative effects of being bullied by other brand followers in online brand communities.

2.8 With what effect – Consequences of inter-consumer hostility

Past research in Psychology has emphasised the negative impact of cybervictimisation on psychological well-being. A meta-analysis by Kowalski et al. (2014) shows that being cyberbullied can cause victims to feel emotionally unwell and experience emotional distress. Likewise, previous marketing research has investigated how inter-consumer hostility affects consumers and brands. Bacile et al. (2018) show that complainants who are victimised by other brand followers after posting a complaint expect companies to address inter-consumer hostility that occurs in their online brand communities, and that justice perceptions towards how companies manage a complaint are lower when companies choose to ignore C2C incivility compared to when they intervene. Bacile (2020) further shows that the decrease in justice perceptions due to C2C incivility leads to a decrease in consumer's perceived service climate (i.e., an assessment of how companies manage C2C incivility in online brand communities). Recent research by Bacile et al. (2020) further highlights the negative impact of C2C incivility on a victim's hedonic, pragmatic and social experience in online brand communities.

On the contrary, Ilhan et al. (2018) suggest that inter-consumer hostility in the context of brand rivalry (i.e., brand followers defending a brand and attacking those who support rival brands) can lead to positive consequences for the brand as well. The hostile interactions between consumers lead to an increase in the volume of comments,

enhancing consumer engagement in the online brand communities. Berendt, Uhrich, and Thompson (2018) also highlight the positive outcome of inter-consumer hostility by showing that hostile interactions between fans of rival brands can enhance group distinctiveness. Such interactions help to increase group identity as the ingroups tend to distinguish themselves from the outgroups and perceive that their group stands out and has a distinctive character compared to the other groups.

Although past research already highlights some potential impacts of inter-consumer hostility in online brand communities on justice perception, consumer online engagement and group distinctiveness, little is known about other consequences especially the negative impact on brand- and community-related outcomes.

2.9 Discussion - Research issues and unresolved questions

In the extant literature, researchers have increasingly investigated consumer hostility, especially when consumers attack one another in an online brand community. In an attempt to synthesise the empirical findings of the past research, this study has developed a conceptual framework which identifies five major dimensions that affect hostile C2C interactions within online brand communities, which is illustrated in Figure 2.3. Table 2.2 synthesises the related studies that fall into the domain of inter-consumer hostility in online brand communities. The proposed framework integrates existing findings from multi-disciplinary research and highlights potential directions for future research. The review of existing findings indicates that past marketing research has focused largely on the attacker's side of the interaction process, while studies about victims have been limited. Although existing research has provided an understanding about the topic such as factors influencing inter-consumer hostility (e.g., Ewing, Wagstaff, and Powell 2013; Husemann, Ladstaetter, and Luedicke 2015) and illustrated different types of hostile interactions (Breitsohl, Roschk, and Feyertag 2018), it is still

unknown whether the situational factor of bystander reactions affects consumer reactions and whether it leads to different outcomes. Moreover, less is known about how consumers react to being bullied in online brand communities and how such hostility negatively affects consumers and brands.

Therefore, the present study suggests three particular research streams that are still in need of more research. First, future research can explore which situational factors affect the interaction process. For instance, cybervictimisation research has suggested that victimisation severity and bystander reactions can affect the process (Ortega et al. 2009; Slonje, Smith, and Friséen 2013). Addressing this is important for future research as it will help to bridge the gap in the literature. Moreover, as researchers highlight that bystanders are important in the cyberbullying process (Sainio et al. 2010; Salmivalli 2010), distinguishing between severe and mild conditions and different types of bystander reactions will help provide a better understanding of this online phenomenon that frequently occurs in online brand communities. This will help to understand what consumers perceive as hostile and what is not, or such hostility may not even be an issue until there are additional reactions that come from other brand followers in the community. Hence, we suggest that the influences of the severity level and the different types of bystander reactions, which have not received much attention in the online brand community literature, are testable factors and interesting covariates for future research.

Second, more research is needed to shed light on the process that consumers go through when being bullied in online brand communities. Although previous consumer research has explored consumer coping behaviours towards stressful situations such as product or service failure (Sengupta, Balaji, and Krishnan 2015; Strizhakova, Tsarenko, and Ruth 2012), coping strategies towards inter-consumer hostility have not been studied to date. Victims may employ different approaches, thus leading to different outcomes. The rationale behind coping decisions such as negative emotions associated with inter-

consumer hostility that may lead brand followers to use different coping strategies is also needed (Breitsohl and Garrod 2016). Thus, it would be informative to test whether and how negative emotions mediate the relationship between consumer hostility and different types of coping that victims may employ. Addressing these research gaps will enhance the understanding of consumer reactions to being bullied in online brand communities and its consequences, which then broadens the research focus in this topic area and makes important contributions to the online brand community literature (Breitsohl, Roschk, and Feyertag 2018). In addition, empirical findings on consumer's appraisal processes and coping behaviours will provide insights for brand managers about how negative consequences of inter-consumer hostility can be mitigated (Breitsohl and Garrod 2016; Camacho, Hassanein, and Head 2018).

Third, the consequences of inter-consumer hostility are under-researched and present a gap. As pointed out by past studies (e.g., Bacile et al. 2018; Bacile 2020), inter-consumer hostility is likely to have detrimental effects on consumers and brands, yet studies that are able to quantify the negative consequences are lacking. While previous studies have identified the possible outcomes of hostile C2C interactions such as perceptions of justice (Bacile et al. 2018), consumer engagement (Ilhan, Kübler, and Pauwels 2018), and group distinctiveness (Berendt, Uhrich, and Thompson 2018), how such hostile interactions impact consumer behaviours in relation to the online brand community as well as the respective brand still remains largely unexplored. Furthermore, there are some research issues that indicate a gap in the extant knowledge. While past research examines outcomes at the aggregate level (Berendt, Uhrich, and Thompson 2018; Ilhan et al. 2018), the impact on an individual is still largely not understood. Moreover, the findings from Bacile et al. (2018, 2020) and Bacile (2020) did not capture the outcomes outside a complaint handling context.

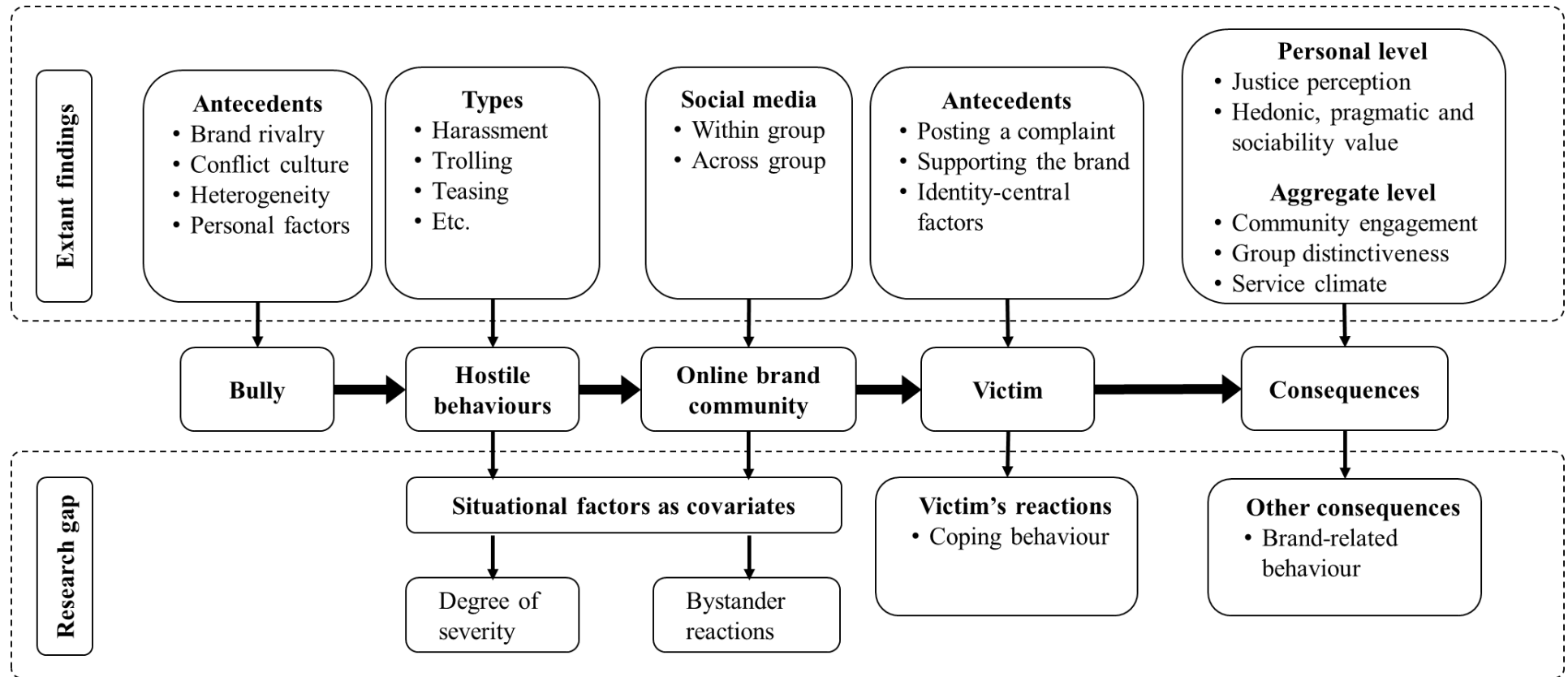


Figure 2.3 A conceptual framework of inter-consumer hostility in online brand communities (Author 2020)

Table 2.2 Main literature on inter-consumer hostility in online brand communities

| Author, year | Focus of investigation | Method | Findings |
|--|---|-----------------------------------|---|
| Hickman and Ward (2007) | Hostile communication between rival brands | Experiment | Antecedents of hostile interactions |
| Luedicke, Thompson, and Giesler (2010) | C2C interactions in Hummer's online brand community | Online observation and interview | Antecedents of hostile interactions |
| Ewing, Wagstaff, and Powell (2013) | Hostile communication between rival brands | Online observation | Antecedents and forms of hostile interactions |
| Thomas, Price, and Schau (2013) | Heterogeneity in consumption communities | Online observation and interview | Antecedents of hostile interactions |
| Husemann, Ladstaetter, and Luedicke (2015) | Conflict culture within an online brand community and conflict management | Online observation | Antecedents of hostile interactions |
| Dineva, Breitsohl, and Garrod (2017) | C2C conflict management on social media | Online observation | Conflict management strategies |
| Golf-Papez and Veer (2017) | Trolling in online brand communities | Integrative literature review | The conceptual model of the manifestation of trolling behaviours and trolling management strategies |
| Breitsohl, Roschk, and Feyertag (2018) | Consumer bullying behaviour in online brand communities | Online observation | Forms of consumer brand bullying behaviours |
| Bacile et al. (2018) | C2C incivility on social media | Online observation and experiment | Outcome of C2C incivility |
| Berendt, Urich, and Thompson (2018) | Inter-consumer brand rivalry | Experiment | Outcome of inter-consumer brand rivalry |
| Ilhan et al. (2018) | Hostile communication between rival brands | Content analysis | Outcome of inter-consumer hostility |
| Dineva et al. (2020) | C2C conflict management on social media | Online observation and experiment | Conflict management strategies |
| Bacile (2020) | C2C incivility on social media | Experiment | Outcome of C2C incivility |
| Bacile et al. (2020) | C2C incivility on social media | Experiment | Outcome of C2C incivility |

The limitations from past studies thus signify a gap in our extant knowledge about the consequences of inter-consumer hostility in online brand communities. The contradictory findings from past studies also raise a challenge for scholars to shed light on the outcomes of inter-consumer hostility in online brand communities. Therefore, future research can explore the impact of inter-consumer hostility on both consumers and brands to shed light on the effects of this online phenomenon and on the contradictory conclusions as to whether hostile C2C interactions has negative or positive consequences.

2.10 Conclusion

This study offers a conceptual framework that helps to provide a comprehensive understanding of hostile C2C interactions in online brand communities. The study shows that inter-consumer hostility is usually studied from the bully's perspective (e.g., why and how a consumer attacks one another), whilst the victim's perspective has had less attention (e.g., how victims cope with being bullied in online brand communities and the negative consequences of such inter-consumer hostility for victims). The study proposes that situational factors and the victim's reaction are important elements that accompany the victimisation process. Moreover, given that inter-consumer hostility in online brand communities leads to a detrimental impact on both consumers and brands, it is important to explore the potential negative consequences of such hostile interactions between consumers.

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Chapter 3: If It's Bad, Don't Pretend It Didn't Happen! Exploring the Outcomes of Victimisation and Bystander Reactions in Online Brand Communities

Abstract

Online brand communities such as Facebook fanpages have seen an increasing level of cybervictimisation amongst brand followers, raising a challenge to marketing practices on how community managers can deal with brand victimisation to mitigate its potential risks. We term the phenomenon of being bullied by a fellow brand follower 'Brand Victimisation'. Although the marketing literature provides evidence that brand victimisation occurs within online brand communities, little is known about its consequences. There is a lack of knowledge on the impact that brand victimisation can have on those who are bullied and brands, which companies need to be aware of. Based on the literature on cybervictimisation, we designed an experiment that explores how brand victimisation affects three outcomes variables, namely a victim's positive word-of-mouth intentions, community satisfaction and community following intentions. Using a sample of 387 participants, our results show that outcomes significantly differ in relation to the severity of victimisation (Severe vs Mild) and the reactions (Defending vs Reinforcing vs Pretending) from bystanders (i.e., other brand followers in the community who witness the victimisation incident). Our findings offer brand managers a better understanding of the undesirable effects of cybervictimisation in online brand communities, and on the type of reactions from bystanders that they may like to encourage.

Keywords: Consumer misbehaviour; Consumer interactions; Online community; Social media; Brands

3.1 Introduction

Online brand communities have become an increasingly important marketing channel for companies to communicate with brand followers and deliver brand-related content (Beukeboom, Kerkhof, and de Vries 2015). In 2019, more than 50% of Internet users have followed brands on social media (Statusbrew 2019), and more than 70% of companies have reported that online brand communities significantly improve brand exposure, awareness, engagement, commitment, and credibility (Venngage 2019). Brand followers, likewise, can share their common interests about brands, support the brand by liking content, and interact with others (de Vries, Gensler, and Leeflang 2012). In doing so, brand followers gain utilitarian benefits such as updated brand information, vouchers and post-purchase guidance (Lin and Lu 2011), as well as hedonic benefits in the form of receiving positive feedback on their comments, sharing entertaining content and building social capital (Shi, Chen, and Chow 2016).

However, despite the many positive benefits, there is a ‘dark side’ to online brand communities. Research highlights that social media users increasingly engage in being bullied by other users, a behaviour commonly described as cybervictimisation (Álvarez-García et al. 2017). For example, a survey shows that 41% of Americans adults ($n = 4,248$) have been bullied online, and an even larger number (66%) have witnessed others being bullied (Pew Research Centre 2017). A recent report also indicates a general growth in cybervictimisation as the number of teens experiencing cybervictimisation rose from 32% in 2016 to over 50% in 2018 (Statista 2019). Marketing scholars have started to observe similar developments. Recent work shows, for instance, that consumers in online brand communities may get bullied and become victims because they support rival brands (Ilhan et al. 2018), or because they complain about a negative product or service experience (Bacile et al. 2018).

There also seems to be a growing trend of consumers becoming victims to trolling, whereby a brand follower gets verbally attacked without any obvious reason or cause for provocation (Breitsohl, Roschk, and Feyertag 2018).

To date, the marketing literature thus provides evidence that cybervictimisation occurs within online brand communities. Yet, in comparison, little is known about its consequences, which is how being bullied impacts on consumer behaviour related to brands and online brand communities. Since online brand communities are very important and useful marketing channels for companies (Beukeboom, Kerkhof, and de Vries 2015), it is crucial to identify the potential detrimental impact of brand victimisation in online brand communities on the consumers and brands, and companies need to be aware of the negative outcomes of brand victimisation that occur in their online brand communities, so that this can be mitigated.

Given that online brand communities on social media facilitate large scale consumer interaction (de Vries, Gensler, and Leeflang 2012), a high degree of interactional dynamics between consumers (e.g., the volume of comments and the speed at which consumers can interact with each other) presents a challenge to marketing practices on how community managers can deal with brand victimisation to mitigate its potential risks. Moreover, as past research indicates that consumers who are attacked by other consumers expect companies to address victimisation incidents that occur in their online brand communities (Bacile et al. 2018), this study therefore aims to guide brand managers about the conditions in which they should intervene, and how, when victimisation is detected.

Following the research on cybervictimisation in the psychology literature, we term the incident of a consumer who is bullied by a fellow brand follower in an online brand community 'Brand Victimisation'. We report on an experiment that tests how being bullied

affects a consumer's positive word-of-mouth (PWOM) intentions, community satisfaction, and community following intentions. We decided to focus on these outcome variables since they represent established constructs that have been used to measure the outcomes of positive events in online brand communities in extant works (e.g., Brown, Broderick, and Lee 2007; Hamilton, Kaltcheva, and Rohm 2016), allowing us a comparison to negative events (i.e., brand victimisation). Following meta-analytical evidence from the cybervictimisation literature (Kowalski et al. 2014), our experiment accounts for two central influences on how individuals' react to being bullied; that is, we compare the impact of a severely aggressive versus a mildly aggressive incident of brand victimisation, and the reactions from bystanders (i.e., other brand followers in the community who witness the victimisation incident) who either defend the victim, reinforce the cybervictimisation or pretend that they did not notice the incident. Results show that both severity and bystander reactions can have a significant impact, and we present some novel, sometimes counter-intuitive insights on brand victimisation in online brand communities. Together, our findings offer three main contributions to the literature.

First, we address the general lack of knowledge on victims. Whilst abundant studies in Psychology indicate how being bullied impacts on factors' related to individual well-being (e.g., Hoff and Mitchell 2009; Slonje, Smith, and Friséen 2013), our study is the first to highlight its impact on brand- and brand community-related behaviours. In doing so, we contribute to the scarce knowledge of digital marketing research on hostile consumer-to-consumer (C2C) interactions on social media (Appel et al. 2020), and we specifically expand the literature by focusing on the so far unexplored perspective of the victim.

Second, the first part of our experiment establishes that brand victimisation has negative consequences, and that it is important to distinguish between different degrees of

victimisation severity. Our results confirm the importance of victimisation severity as outlined in the psychology literature and expand knowledge by applying it to an online brand community paradigm. We contribute to the scarce quantitative research in the marketing literature by showing that brand victimisation severity influences brand- and brand community-related behaviours (i.e., PWOM intentions, community satisfaction and community following intentions) and thus presents a commercially relevant issue for brand managers.

Third, we expand our results by taking into account how bystanders' reactions to incidents of brand victimisation affect victims' behaviours. In doing so, we contribute to research on social feedback within online brand communities (e.g., Johnson and Lowe 2015), and we enrich current knowledge by applying it to a hostile C2C interactions context. Furthermore, in exploring three types of bystander reactions (Defending, Reinforcing and Pretending), we offer new insights into two schools of thought in the cybervictimisation literature; the traditional perspective, suggesting bystanders reinforcing a bully to be the most detrimental type of bystander reactions (Salmivalli 2010), versus more recent work arguing that bystanders' pretending that nothing happened can have a more detrimental impact on victims (Paull, Omari, and Standen 2012). Our findings show that, for severe cases of victimisation, pretending may actually have a more negative effect on victims than reinforcing.

In what follows, we first review the studies in the digital marketing literature that have covered inter-consumer hostility in online brand communities, followed by the development of our hypotheses which we base on extant cybervictimisation research. We subsequently offer details on the method used, including our samples and the experimental design, followed by an outline of our results. Our study concludes by discussing the overall

contributions of our findings, and we provide some managerial implications and avenues for future research.

3.2 Literature review

3.2.1 Victimisation in online brand communities

Although conceptual links between the marketing and cybervictimisation literature are scarce, a number of studies have observed consumers being bullied in other paradigms. One line of research indicates that consumers may get attacked when they engage in complaints and negative word-of-mouth behaviours. Bacile et al. (2018) highlight that consumers hold companies responsible for incivility, and that responding to incivility can improve perceptions of justice and service recovery effectiveness, whereas ignoring it has negative effects. Their study further proposes that the negative effects of incivility extends beyond direct victims (complainants) to observers (those who read the comment but decide not to get involved) as well. Hostility between consumers may further occur as a consequence of brand rivalry. For instance, Hickman and Ward's (2007) study indicates that members who strongly identify with a brand community are more likely to engage in inter-group stereotyping and verbally attacking members of rival brand communities. Ewing, Wagstaff, and Powell's (2013) findings show that rival brand communities may attack each other via humorous as well as hostile forms of comments. More recently, Ilhan et al. (2018) summarised that marketing communications such as promoting new products can trigger brand rivalry and lead to consumers defending their brands by attacking rivals. A recent study by Breitsohl, Roschk, and Feyertag (2018) confirms that consumers may become victims of cyber-trolling, in that consumers were bullied despite having made a comment that supported

the brand that a community was dedicated to. This observation is mirrored in other fields of research (e.g., Cole and West 2016; Synnott, Coulias, and Ioannou 2017) that highlight the growing amount of unprovoked, seemingly ‘out of the blue’ attacks on users of online communities.

Whilst these existing research streams offer substantive evidence that brand victimisation occurs within online brand communities, they largely rely on netnographic evidence (i.e., observations of online comments) and do not directly measure consequences for victims’ behaviours. Two notable exceptions come from Bacile et al. (2018) and Ilhan et al. (2018), however they present very different results. Experimental findings from Bacile et al. (2018) on complainers who are attacked in online brand communities suggests that consumers expect companies to intervene in hostile interactions, and that justice perceptions of how the company handles a complaint are lower when hostility is ignored compared to when the company responds. Yet, Ilhan et al. (2018) used a time-series analysis to suggest that consumers defending a brand and attacking others may lead to positive outcomes, including an increase in the volume of brand-related social media content, as well as a positive sentiment. These results seem to reach contradictory conclusions as to whether cybervictimisation has negative or positive consequences. Moreover, both studies do not operationalise the impact of brand victimisation in relation to how it affects a victim’s brand- and brand community relationship. Specifically, Bacile et al. (2018) concentrate on outcomes related to consumers’ attitudes towards how the host of an online brand community handled the victimisation of a complainer and does not capture victim’s reactions outside of a complaint-handling context. Ilhan et al. (2018) investigate outcomes at the aggregate level, rather than exploring how being bullied affects the individual consumer. Consequently, there

is a gap in current knowledge on the consequences of victimisation for brand- and brand community-related behaviours.

3.2.2 Hypotheses development

3.2.2.1 Cybervictimisation

Cybervictimisation refers to being the target of threatening, offensive, or hostile comments through the Internet (Álvarez-García et al. 2017). Consequences of cybervictimisation include a greater likelihood for depression (Slonje, Smith, and Frisé 2013), suicide ideation (Hinduja and Patchin 2010), anxiety (Ortega et al. 2009), and emotional distress (Patchin and Hinduja 2006). In a workplace context, cybervictimisation causes higher absenteeism and staff turnover intentions, as well as lower job satisfaction and work performance (Giumetti et al. 2012; Kowalski, Toth, and Morgan 2018). Researchers further emphasise that cybervictimisation can lead to negative social outcomes such as a higher sense of loneliness and a lower sense of belonging to the community within which the victimisation occurs (Olenik-Shemesh, Heiman, and Eden 2012). Camacho, Hassanein, and Head (2018) further point out that cyber-victims on Facebook spent less time on social media and are less willing to engage in public activities.

According to meta-analytical findings from the cybervictimisation literature (Kowalski et al. 2014), two factors – the severity of a cybervictimisation incident and the reactions of a bystander – affect the degree to which victims experience negative consequences. In terms of severity, researchers usually distinguish between mild and severe forms of cybervictimisation; the more severe a victimisation event is perceived to be, the higher the negative impact on the victim (Chen and Cheng 2017). Ortega et al. (2009) found

that victims who experienced severe victimisation reported a higher level of stress and depression than those who experienced mild victimisation. Likewise, Camacho, Hassanein, and Head (2018) found that victims who perceived cybervictimisation as severe reported higher anxiety and lower satisfaction towards Facebook compared to those who perceived it as mild. A meta-analysis by Kowalski et al. (2014) confirms cybervictimisation severity to be one of the strongest negative influences on psychological well-being and the likelihood for subsequent problematic social behaviours.

Bystander reactions refer to the social feedback that victims receive from those who witness an event and thereafter decide whether and how to get involved (Bastiaensens et al. 2014). The two most common types of bystander reactions explored in the cybervictimisation literature are reinforcing the bully (e.g., assisting, laughing or cheering) and defending the victim (e.g., helping the victim and/or telling the bully to stop). Typically, when bystanders defend the victim, the consequences for the victim are less negative than when bystanders reinforce the bully and join in (Salmivalli 2010). Studies show that when a bystander supports the bully, it can lead to a higher frequency of victimisation (Salmivalli, Voeten, and Poskiparta 2011), an increase in subsequent aggressiveness (Pepler, Craig, and O'Connell 2010), and higher levels of anxiety and depression on part of the victim (Salmivalli 2010). In contrast, when defended, the negative impact for victims seem to be buffered as their social anxiety and peer rejection decreases (Sainio et al. 2010). Recently, some authors have identified that bystanders on social media may engage in a third behaviour, namely pretending that the cybervictimisation did not take place, despite an obvious awareness of the incident (Twemlow, Fonagy, and Sacco 2004). Similarly, Paull, Omari, and Standen (2012) suggest that victims may find bystanders trying to ignore the victimisation incident as equally offensive as bystanders supporting the bully. Salmivalli (2014) further argues that

victims may regard such behaviour as silent approval which is likely to negatively impact on their perceptions of social support.

3.2.2.2 Brand Victimisation & Consequences

The cybervictimisation literature (see, for example, Costello et al. 2016) has so far exclusively focused on individuals who become targets of victimisation due to identity-central factors such as one's physical appearance (e.g., body weight, skin colour), socio-demographic background (e.g., gender, sexual orientation), or personal belief systems (e.g., political, religious). Yet, as shown by Breitsohl, Roschk, and Feyertag (2018), brands present a similar identity-central factor due to which individuals can become victimised. Following this notion, it is thus likely that cybervictimisation in relation to a brand, within an online brand community, may have additional consequences to the psychological factors considered in the extant cybervictimisation literature. We therefore put forward that being bullied in online brand communities will have consequences for the individual's brand - and brand community- related factors. Specifically, this article suggests that three outcomes which have been shown to be affected by non-hostile interactions in prior work on online brand communities (Brown, Broderick, and Lee 2007; Hamilton, Kaltcheva, and Rohm 2016), namely PWOM intentions, community satisfaction and community following intentions, will also be affected by hostile interactions, in this case being bullied by fellow brand followers in online brand communities.

PWOM includes positive information about a brand or company that transfers from one to another, either in person or through a communication medium (Yüksel and Yüksel 2007). *PWOM* is an important consumer behaviour in relation to online brand communities

because of its comparably high credibility and perceived usefulness (King, Racherla, and Bush 2014). Cybervictimisation research suggests that being cybervictimised decreases victims' prosocial behaviours (Kowalski et al. 2014). Researchers further suggest that these prosocial behaviours affect victims' responses to being bullied as it leads to a decrease in communication behaviours that are beneficial to other people such as PWOM (Perren and Alsaker 2006). Whilst there is little evidence in the marketing literature on how an incident of brand victimisation affects a victim's PWOM intentions, the cybervictimisation literature points towards the following:

H1: Brand followers who experience brand victimisation will show lower intentions to spread PWOM compared to brand followers who do not experience brand victimisation, with those experiencing severe brand victimisation showing the lowest intentions to spread PWOM.

Community satisfaction can be defined as a consumer's evaluation of the overall performance of an online brand community (Au, Ngai, and Cheng 2008). Community satisfaction is a significant predictor of consumers' community revisiting intentions (Bhattacharjee 2001; Limayem and Cheung 2008), community engagement (Jin et al. 2013) and overall brand loyalty (McAlexander, Kim, and Roberts 2003). There are studies on positive C2C interactions that look at this outcome variable. For instance, Brodie et al. (2013) highlight that positive C2C interactions in online brand communities illustrate value co-creation within the community that enhance consumer satisfaction towards the brand and its online community. Jang et al. (2008) indicate that positive interactions between consumers in an online brand community positively influence community satisfaction, which in turn leads to higher consumer commitment to communicate within the community. In the same

way, Liang et al. (2011) show that positive C2C interactions in an online brand community positively affect relationship quality between consumers and the community, which ultimately increase consumers' satisfaction towards such communities. In comparison, this study focuses on the outcome of negative C2C interactions (i.e., brand victimisation). Since community satisfaction represents an established construct that has been used to measure the outcome of positive events in online brand communities in previous studies, focusing on this variables allows us comparison to a negative brand victimisation event. Camacho, Hassanein, and Head (2018) found that being bullied on Facebook could make the victims feel anxious, which in turn decreases the victim's satisfaction towards Facebook. Cybervictimisation can also lead to an increase of loneliness which then decrease friendship satisfaction (Leung and McBride-Chang 2013). Studies further suggest that being cyberbullied leads to a decrease in life satisfaction (Kowalski et al. 2014), workplace satisfaction (Coyne et al. 2017), as well as satisfaction with the online environment (Hu et al. 2020), and we suggest this to extend to community satisfaction as well. Thus, we hypothesise the following:

H2: Brand followers who experience brand victimisation will show lower community satisfaction compared to brand followers who do not experience brand victimisation, with those experiencing severe brand victimisation showing the lowest community satisfaction.

Community following intentions can be defined as a consumer's intention to continue following an online brand community on social media (Ku, Chen, and Zhang 2013). Community following intentions is important because it allows companies to stay connected and communicate with brand followers (Dholakia, Bagozzi, and Pearo 2004). Moreover, following an online brand community positively influences brand loyalty (Godey et al. 2016)

and purchasing intentions (Brodie et al. 2013). Past research in brand communities shows that positive C2C interactions in an online brand community positively influences relationship quality between consumers and the community, resulting in an increase of consumers' continuance intentions towards such communities (Liang et al. 2011). Jung, Kim, and Kim (2014) indicate that positive C2C interactions in online brand communities offer social benefits to consumers, which then positively influences consumers to keep following the community on social media. Likewise, Mammonov, Koufaris, and Benbunan-Fich (2016) further support that such positive C2C interactions can increase consumers' sense of community, which then subsequently increase consumers' willingness to keep following and continue using such online brand communities. In contrast to these outcomes of positive C2C interactions, some studies show the negative outcomes of negative C2C interactions. A study by Thomas, Price, and Schau (2013) suggests that when consumers become involved in a conflict with other community members, they may be less likely to continue following the online brand community. In addition, recent cybervictimisation research shows that being bullied on Facebook can reduce frequency and time spent on Facebook by the victims (Camacho, Hassanein, and Head 2018). Victims also reported that they would unfriend or unfollow the bully after being bullied (Radovic et al. 2017). As such, we propose the following:

H3: Brand followers who experience brand victimisation will show lower intentions to keep following the online brand community compared to brand followers who do not experience brand victimisation, with those experiencing severe brand victimisation showing the lowest intentions to keep following the online brand community.

Following our proposition that brand victimisation has a negative effect on these outcomes, and that this varies by the degree of victimisation severity, we further aim to explore to what extent bystander reactions interact with victimisation severity. In other words, we suggest that the way bystanders in online brand communities react to brand victimisation would buffer or intensify brand victimisation at different degrees of severity. Following the cybervictimisation literature (Salmivalli 2010), we expect that brand victims will be less inclined to be satisfied with the online brand community, keep following it and spread PWOM when bystanders reinforce the bully compared to when they defend the victim. However, little is known about victims' response to bystander behaviours when taking different degrees of victimisation severity into account. Moreover, whilst researchers suggest that the third type of bystander reactions, namely pretending, will also be perceived as more negative than being defended (Salmivalli 2014), there is little empirical evidence on comparing pretending to reinforcing. Given these limitations, we do not formulate a hypothesis but put forward the following research question:

R1: How do three possible Bystander reactions (Reinforcing, Defending and Pretending) affect victims' PWOM intentions, community satisfaction and community following intentions when the victimisation incident is mild as compared to when it is severe?

3.3 Method

3.3.1 Design and participants

To investigate the impact of brand victimisation, we utilised a scenario-based experiment and a 2 (Victimisation severity: Severe vs Mild) x 3 (Bystander reactions: Reinforcing vs Defending vs Pretending) between-subjects factorial design with one control

group. Given the reported reluctance of victims to participate in research studies in Psychology (Gosling and Mason 2015), we followed a purposive sampling approach. We employed an online data panel provider to recruit participants based on the following three screening questions: (1) Do you like or follow the fanpage of any brand on Facebook?, (2) How often do you post brand-related comments on Facebook fanpages? and (3) How often have others replied with negative comments to your brand-related posts? Participants who answered ‘No’ for the first question and ‘Never’ for the second or third question were not included in the survey. We concentrated on Facebook fanpages as brand community context since Facebook is the most popular social media platform with the largest number of daily active users of over 2.4 billion (Smart Insights 2020), and is the most popular social media platform for online brand communities rated by companies (Statista 2020).

Participants further had to pass attention checks in order to qualify. Moreover, a textbox required participants to enter the name of a brand that they follow on Facebook, acting as further criterion for inclusion. A final utilisable sample of 387 participants consisted of 66% female and 34% male participants, with the majority of participants (61.2%) aged between 25-54 years.

3.3.2 Manipulation of independent variables

On entering the experiment, participants typed the name of a brand that they had previously ‘liked’ or ‘followed’ on Facebook into a textbox, and they also put their Facebook name into another textbox. The entered names were automatically forwarded and incorporated in the scenarios and scales to increase the scenario realism and relevance of scale items. The first scenario showed participants the Facebook fanpage of their brand of

choice, in which they saw the brand's latest video advertisement and were asked to make a positive comment about it (see Appendix 3A). We asked for a positive comment for three reasons. First, since our sample consisted of brand supporters, a positive statement would more closely resemble their actual predisposition towards the brand, rather than asking them to imagine being brand rivals or complainants who make a negative statement. Moreover, unprovoked attacks on brand supporters appear to be increasingly popular (Cole and West 2016), hence allowing us to capture a real-life trend in social media related to the occurrence of trolling. Finally, operationalising the brand victim as complainant or brand rival would have necessitated us to control for participants' justice perceptions regarding the complaint cause, or participants' attitude towards brand rivals; portraying the victim as a brand supporter allowed us to avoid having to control for such noise effects.

Subsequently, participants received a notification that other brand followers had responded to their comment, and participants were channeled towards our first manipulation (Victimisation severity). Participants were randomly allocated to one of three conditions: (1) severe victimisation, (2) mild victimisation, and (3) a control condition. Adapted from Obermaier, Fawzi, and Koch (2014), the severe victimisation scenario contained a brand follower who bullied a victim by using swearwords and no signs of humour; in contrast, the mild victimisation scenario contained elements of humour and no swearwords. For the control condition, comments were positive (i.e., no victimisation took place). Next, participants were channeled towards the second manipulation (Bystander reactions), randomly exposing them to one of three conditions: (1) bystanders reinforcing the bullying comments towards the participants, (2) bystanders defending the participants and (3) bystanders pretending that nothing happened (see Appendix 3B). We then channeled participants towards our scale items (i.e., the outcome variables). We also asked participants

to rate the realism of the scenarios (“The described scenario is realistic”) on a 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree) Likert scale, following Breitsohl and Garrod (2016). The result indicate that the scenarios were viewed as realistic ($M = 5.41$, $SD = 1.47$).

3.3.3 Measures

Measures of the dependent variables were adopted from established instruments, as illustrated in Table 3.1, and anchored on seven-point Likert scales (1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree). We measured PWOM intentions using a 3-item scale adapted from Yüksel and Yüksel (2007), community satisfaction via Au, Ngai, and Cheng's (2008) 4-item scale, and community following intentions with 3 items from Ku, Chen, and Zhang (2013). We further measured participants' self-esteem (5 items from Jamieson, Harkins, and Williams, 2010) and perceived social support (4 items from Zimet et al., 1988) since meta-analytic results suggest these significantly affect social media users' responses to being bullied (Kowalski et al. 2014).

Table 3.1 Measurement items

| Variable | Item | Loadings | α |
|------------------------|--|----------|----------|
| | <i>Looking at these comments, ...</i> | | |
| PWOM intentions | I would say positive things about [brand] to other people. | .94 | .89 |
| | I would encourage others to visit [brand]'s fanpage on Facebook. | .86 | |
| | I would recommend [brand] to other people. | .94 | |
| Community satisfaction | I would be very contented with [brand]'s fanpage. | .95 | .97 |
| | I would be very pleased with [brand]'s fanpage. | .97 | |
| | I would feel delighted with [brand]'s fanpage. | .96 | |
| | Overall, I would be very satisfied with [brand]'s fanpage. | .96 | |

| | | | |
|--------------------------------|---|-----|-----|
| Community following intentions | I would plan to keep following [brand] on Facebook in the future. | .94 | .95 |
| | I would intend to continue to follow [brand] on Facebook in the future. | .97 | |
| | I would expect my following of [brand] on Facebook to continue in the future. | .96 | |
| <i>In general, ...</i> | | | |
| Self-esteem | I feel good about myself. | .90 | .90 |
| | I feel high in self-esteem. | .91 | |
| | I feel liked. | .84 | |
| | I feel satisfied. | .88 | |
| | I feel insecure. (R) | .75 | |
| Perceived social support | My friends really try to help me. | .87 | .93 |
| | I can count on my friends when things go wrong. | .91 | |
| | I have friends with whom I can share my joys and sorrows. | .93 | |
| | I can talk about my problems with my friends. | .91 | |

3.4 Results

To ensure participants perceived our manipulations as intended, we measured victimisation severity with the item “The comments from John Hope and Kylie Baroux were meant to be hostile”, following Ordoñez and Nekmat (2019). The manipulation of victimisation severity was confirmed by a one-way Welch ANOVA (Welch's $F(2, 253.18) = 1317.83$, $p < .001$), indicating significant differences across the three conditions: severe victimisation ($M = 6.39$, $SD = 1.00$), mild victimisation ($M = 4.44$, $SD = 1.77$), and the control group ($M = 1.32$, $SD = 0.52$). Games-Howell post hoc analysis revealed a significant difference between the control group and mild victimisation (mean difference = 3.12, $SE = .15$, $p < .001$), the control group and severe victimisation (mean difference = 5.07, $SE = .10$, $p < .001$), as well as the mild victimisation and severe victimisation (mean difference = 1.94, $SE = .16$, $p < .001$). In line with León, Nouwen, and Sheffield (2007), bystander reactions were measured with the item “Tom Stanfield's comment was meant to support you”. As confirmed by a one-way Welch ANOVA (Welch's $F(2, 143.05) = 297.62$, $p < .001$), participants perceived bystander reactions to be significantly different when comparing reinforcing ($M = 2.12$, $SD = 1.62$), defending ($M = 6.30$, $SD = 1.09$), and pretending ($M =$

3.81, SD = 1.52). Games-Howell post hoc analysis showed a significant difference between reinforcing and pretending (mean difference = 1.69, SE = .25, $p < .001$), reinforcing and defending (mean difference = 4.19, SE = .18, $p < .001$), as well as pretending and defending (mean difference = 2.49, SE = .23, $p < .001$).

To test H1–H3, we conducted a one-way MANCOVA. Multivariate results showed significant differences between the three conditions on the combined dependent variables ($F(6, 762) = 10.51$, $p < .001$, Pillai's Trace = .153, partial $\eta^2 = .08$) after controlling for self-esteem and perceived social support. Univariate results also revealed significant differences between the three conditions on PWOM intentions ($F(2, 382) = 7.84$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .04$), community satisfaction ($F(2, 382) = 29.99$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .14$) and community following intentions ($F(2, 382) = 8.65$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .04$). Table 3.2 lists mean and standard deviation of the dependent variables of severe victimisation, mild victimisation, and the control group.

Table 3.2 Cell means for dependent variables across the victimisation severity conditions

| Victimisation severity | Dependent variable | | | | | |
|------------------------|--------------------|------|------------------------|------|--------------------------------|------|
| | PWOM intentions | | Community satisfaction | | Community following intentions | |
| | M | SD | M | SD | M | SD |
| Severe | 5.40 ^a | 1.41 | 4.40 ^a | 1.65 | 5.54 ^a | 1.38 |
| Mild | 5.58 ^a | 1.20 | 4.99 ^b | 1.38 | 5.91 ^b | 1.00 |
| Control | 6.04 ^b | 0.91 | 5.81 ^c | 0.96 | 6.12 ^b | 0.85 |

Note: 1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree; a-b/a-c/b-c indicates a significant difference ($p < .05$); a-a/b-b indicates a non-significant difference ($p > .05$); $n=387$

Pairwise comparisons further highlight that, for PWOM intentions, the severe victimisation had lower PWOM intentions than the control condition (mean difference = -

.64, SE = .16, $p < .001$). Likewise, the mild victimisation had lower PWOM intentions than the control condition (mean difference = -.46, SE = .16, $p = .01$). The difference between severe and mild victimisation was not statistically significant. For community satisfaction, the severe victimisation had lower community satisfaction than the mild victimisation (mean difference = -.59, SE = .16, $p = .001$), as well as lower than the control condition (mean difference = -1.42, SE = .18, $p < .001$). Similarly, the mild victimisation had lower community satisfaction than the control condition (mean difference = -.83, SE = .18, $p < .001$). For community following intentions, the severe victimisation had lower community following intentions than the mild victimisation (mean difference = -.37, SE = .13, $p = .010$), as well as lower than the control condition (mean difference = -.59, SE = .15, $p < .001$). The difference between mild victimisation and the control condition was not statistically significant. Overall, these results generally support H1, H2 and H3, indicating that severe victimisation leads to lower scores on the outcome variables than the control condition, and that in most cases, severe victimisation leads to lower scores than mild victimisation, whilst mild victimisation leads to lower scores than the control condition.

To explore research question 1 (i.e., the interaction effects between victimisation severity and bystander reactions), we conducted a 2x3 MANCOVA. The results revealed a significant main effect for victimisation severity on the combined dependent variables ($F(3, 290) = 6.69$, $p < .001$, Pillai's Trace = .07, partial $\eta^2 = .07$) after controlling for self-esteem and perceived social support, whereas the main effect of bystander reactions on the combined dependent variables was not significant ($F(6, 582) = .58$, $p = .75$, Pillai's Trace = .01, partial $\eta^2 = .01$). Furthermore, the results revealed a significant interaction effects between victimisation severity and bystander reactions on the combined dependent variables ($F(6, 582) = 3.01$, $p = .01$, Pillai's Trace = .06, partial $\eta^2 = .03$).

As indicated in Table 3.3, the univariate results also revealed significant main effects of victimisation severity on separated dependent variables, but none for the main effects of bystander reactions. The univariate results also showed significant interaction effects on PWOM intentions ($F(2, 292) = 5.82, p = .003$, partial $\eta^2 = .04$), community satisfaction ($F(2, 292) = 3.94, p = .02$, partial $\eta^2 = .03$) and community following intentions ($F(2, 292) = 3.89, p = .02$, partial $\eta^2 = .03$).

Table 3.3 Summary results of two-way ANCOVAs

| Independent variables | Dependent variables | | | | | |
|--|---------------------|----------|------------------------|----------|--------------------------------|----------|
| | PWOM intentions | | Community satisfaction | | Community following intentions | |
| | F | η^2 | F | η^2 | F | η^2 |
| Victimisation severity | 4.94* | .02 | 15.46*** | .05 | 12.32** | .04 |
| Bystander reactions | .83 | .01 | .79 | .01 | .07 | .00 |
| Victimisation severity x Bystander reactions | 5.82** | .04 | 3.94* | .03 | 3.89* | .03 |

Note: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$; $n=300$ (excluding the control group)

To explore these differences further, we analysed the simple effects of bystander reactions on the two victimisation severity conditions. Table 3.4 lists the mean and standard deviation of the dependent variables of each experimental group.

Table 3.4 Cell means for dependent variables by experimental conditions

| Victimisation severity | Bystander reactions | PWOM intentions | | Community satisfaction | | Community following intentions | |
|------------------------|---------------------|-------------------|--------|------------------------|--------|--------------------------------|--------|
| | | M | (SD) | M | (SD) | M | (SD) |
| Severe | Reinforcing | 5.50 ^a | (1.50) | 4.29 | (1.73) | 5.59 ^a | (1.39) |
| | Defending | 5.58 ^a | (1.22) | 4.78 ^a | (1.60) | 5.66 ^a | (1.24) |
| | Pretending | 4.78 ^b | (1.44) | 3.94 ^b | (1.50) | 5.09 ^a | (1.58) |
| Mild | Reinforcing | 5.34 ^a | (1.33) | 4.91 ^a | (1.48) | 5.85 ^a | (1.09) |
| | Defending | 5.60 ^a | (1.11) | 4.86 ^a | (1.31) | 5.77 ^a | (1.00) |
| | Pretending | 5.94 ^a | (1.05) | 5.31 ^a | (1.34) | 6.22 ^a | (.78) |

Note: 1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree; a-b indicates a significant difference ($p < .05$); a-a indicates a non-significant difference ($p > .05$); $n=300$ (excluding the control group)

In general, results indicated significant differences between bystander reactions when victimisation is severe, as can be seen for PWOM intentions ($F(2, 292) = 4.01$, $p = .02$, partial $\eta^2 = .03$) and community satisfaction ($F(2, 292) = 3.34$, $p = .04$, partial $\eta^2 = .02$), albeit this is not true for community following intentions. Looking at the pairwise comparisons, there is a trend in the data (i.e., when comparing the means) that shows victims to have the lowest PWOM intentions, community satisfaction and community following intentions when they are ignored by bystanders, and the highest when they are defended. The difference between being defended and being ignored was significant for PWOM intentions (mean difference = .80, $SE = .30$, $p = .03$) and community satisfaction (mean difference = 0.84, $SE = .34$, $p = .04$), albeit not for community following intentions. Comparing a situation where bystanders reinforce the bully to the situation where bystanders pretend that nothing happened and ignore the victim, pairwise comparisons show that there is a significant difference for PWOM intentions (mean difference = .73, $SE = .29$, $p = .04$), but not for community satisfaction and community following intentions. There is, again, a trend in the data for all the three outcomes

that show victims tend to have lower PWOM intentions, community satisfaction and community following intentions when they are ignored compared to when they are attacked by the bystander. Surprisingly, we do not find any significant difference between defending and reinforcing when victimisation is severe.

In situations where victimisation is mild, there was no significant difference between conditions where bystanders defend, pretend or reinforce. However, there is a trend in relation to pretending, indicating that victims had the highest PWOM intentions, community satisfaction and community following intentions compared to the other conditions. Albeit not significantly different, it is still surprising that, in the mild condition, pretending apparently has the opposite effect on victims compared to the severe condition.

3.5 Discussion

The purpose of this research was to examine how being bullied in an online brand community affects victims' PWOM intentions, community satisfaction and community following intentions. As there is a lack of research in the marketing literature, we used findings from research in Psychology to hypothesise that victimisation will negatively affect these outcomes, and that victims will further be influenced by the victimisation severity and bystander reactions. Our results suggest that, in most cases, consumers in online brand communities show lower PWOM intentions, community satisfaction and community following intentions when they are bullied, compared to when they are not. Moreover, when victimisation is severe, these outcomes tend to be at their lowest when bystanders ignore a victim, and at their highest when bystanders defend the victim, whilst no significant

differences between bystander reactions were found when victimisation is mild. We discuss these findings and their implications below.

3.5.1 Theoretical implications

First, we contribute to the scarce literature on inter-consumer hostility by offering quantitative insights on the victim's perspective. Research in this area has largely relied on netnographic observations, and outcomes of inter-consumer hostility that cannot be observed by analysing online commentary has been a recognized gap in the digital marketing literature (Bacile et al. 2018; Ilhan et al. 2018). Our study is among the first to provide experimental results that illustrate the detrimental effects of brand victimisation by highlighting that victims experience lower PWOM intentions, community satisfaction and community following intentions than non-victims. These results are consistent with and enrich the cybervictimisation literature in Psychology (Kowalski et al. 2014), which emphasise the detrimental psychological consequences for victims, yet has so far overlooked commercial consequences related to brands and brand communities. The results also contribute to studies from Bacile et al. (2018) and Ilhan et al. (2018) whose conclusions seem to disagree as to whether inter-consumer hostility has favourable or unfavourable consequences for the brand. Our study shows that, at the individual level (rather than the aggregate level explored by Ilhan and colleagues), being verbally attacked by another consumer in an online brand community has detrimental consequences for the brand as favourable attitudinal and behavioural outcomes on part of the victim become less likely. Consistent with Bacile et al. (2018), our experiment indicates that victimisation is an undesirable phenomenon in online brand communities.

Second, our results deepen extant knowledge on how the degree of victimisation severity as well as bystander reactions impact on a victim's subsequent reactions. We contribute to the online brand community literature by being the first to highlight that the two interactional dynamics and their interplay significantly influences brand- and community-related consequences for victims. Our study agrees with others on the importance of social feedback in online brand communities (e.g., Johnson and Lowe 2015), and we enrich current knowledge by applying it to a hostile C2C interaction context. Moreover, we show that, whilst bystander reactions in a mildly severe incident of brand victimisation may not make a significant difference, victims prefer bystanders to support them when the victimisation is severe, rather than being pretending that nothing happened. In addition, there is a trend in the data that indicates victims may even prefer bystanders to join the bully rather than to being ignored. These findings enrich the marketing literature by highlighting the complexity of interactional dynamics taking place in hostile interactions among consumers in online brand communities. Moreover, our results meaningfully link to recent work on how to manage hostile C2C interactions (e.g. Dineva, Breitsohl, and Garrod 2017), showing that future work on effective corporate interventions should account for victimisation severity and bystander reactions.

Finally, a particular finding, namely the impact of bystanders 'pretending', is worth elaborating further. Our results suggest – although differences are not consistently significant for all outcome variables – that pretending is the least preferred bystander reaction when victims are severely victimised, whilst in mild incidents of victimisation has a trend in the data that suggest it may be more preferred than defending or reinforcing. These results seem somewhat counter-intuitive at first, and yet they may help to shed light on the inconclusive state of knowledge in the psychology literature as well as offering a phenomenon that so far

has not been discussed in the digital marketing literature. Existing research on cybervictimisation, albeit scarce, notes that being ignored is an undesirable bystander behaviour for victims (Paull, Omari, and Standen 2012). Researchers have speculated that ‘pretending’ communicates to the victim that others either approve of the incident or at least do not care enough to get involved (Salmivalli 2014). Yet, others have argued that bystanders’ pretending signifies the intent not to further add to and potentially prolong an unpleasant interaction event (Lee 2005), suggesting that a victim may best be protected by attempting to allow a conversation “to move on” (Cenite and Zhang 2010, p. 299). Our results give reason to speculate that a victim perceives others’ attempts to move on as a positive event when victimisation is mild, and perhaps not too hurtful; yet when victimisation is severe, and the victim feels hurt, others pretending it did not happen may further add to the negative impact on a victim. Whilst more research is needed to understand the exact role of pretending, our findings offer the first tentative explanation as to why scholars have so far been in disagreement and thus contribute to an ongoing debate in Psychology. Moreover, we also contribute to digital marketing research in that we suggest consumers not only prefer companies to get involved in hostile interactions among consumers (Dineva, Breitsohl, and Garrod 2017), but they also appear to prefer bystanders to take sides rather than to remain silent.

3.5.2 Managerial implications

Online brand communities allow companies to stay connected with brand followers (Dholakia, Bagozzi, and Pearo 2004), and the likelihood that consumers spread PWOM about brands increases when they have positive community experiences (King, Racherla, and Bush 2014). We highlight that brand victimisation can negatively impact on victims’ relationship

with a brand and its community. Whilst previous work has already suggested that companies should get involved in hostile C2C interactions in their online brand communities, our results show that if unaddressed, brand victims will be less likely to be satisfied with and follow the community, as well as show less intentions to spread PWOM. We therefore urge community managers to get involved, and we offer some insights on scenarios in which an involvement seems most needed. Specifically, when managers identify incidents of severe victimisation, and bystanders either support the bully or pretend nothing happened, we recommend to verbally intervene. Whilst our study does not offer direct insights on what such an intervention may look like, existing studies indicate that doing nothing is less preferred by consumers compared to asking the bully to stop (Bacile et al. 2018).

We further suggest that brand victimisation in online brand communities represents a corporate social responsibility (CSR) opportunity. Given the increasing media attention paid to cyberbullying on social media (The New York Times 2019), and calls for corporations to take a stance (Cybersmile 2020), we propose companies can benefit from being more proactive in supporting the victims. This can be implemented by using online monitoring tools (e.g., Hootsuite, Brandwatch) to identify occurrences of brand victimisation within online brand communities, and then taking action to moderate the situation (Van Hee et al. 2015). We also suggest companies that host online brand communities to publish community rules that highlight what is seen as bullying, and how victims can be supported. *American Express*, for instance, has a clear set of guidelines which has already received positive news coverage (American Express 2018).

Companies can also address the victimisation incident indirectly by having active communities of brand followers to help monitor online brand communities. These brand followers are not directly employed by the companies but typically take actions on behalf of

the companies. They can help detect the victimisation that occurs in online brand communities and support the victims when needed. Companies can further encourage brand followers to keep an eye on the community and to encourage more positive interactions in the online brand communities. Since internet can significantly facilitate brand victimisation in online brand communities, hostile interactions between brand followers can go out of control in that community managers may not be able to address the victimisation fast enough. We suggest that positively encouraging brand followers to work positively within the online brand communities can help companies to mitigate the negative impact of brand victimisation and maintain positive online environment for brand followers.

3.5.3 Limitations and future research

This study has some limitations that can be addressed in future research. First, the scenarios used in the experiment could have been more complex and thus accounted for further interactional dynamics. Our scenarios depicted incidents of trolling, whilst other forms of bullying such as brand rivals attacking each other are conceivable too. Moreover, we only used two bystanders to operationalise social feedback, whilst in reality more comments, and a greater mix of comments is likely to follow a victimisation event (Breitsohl, Roschk, and Feyertag 2018). Therefore, future research should explore how the volume of comments, and different bystander reactions to the ones used in this study, influence victims' reactions. For instance, a recent study by Veloutsou and Black (2020) indicates that consumers may play a vast number of different roles in online brand communities, and we encourage researchers to explore to what extent this is true for hostile interactions as well. Likewise, Bacile et al. (2018) have found that inter-consumer hostility does not only impact upon victims but also silent observers. We therefore suggest future work to extend our

research design and survey those who witness the victimisation but decide not to get involved.

Second, future studies may like to explore the inconsistent results for some of our dependent variables. Whilst our hypotheses were largely confirmed, and effects indicated the expected direction, some insignificant effects suggest that there are further conditions not covered in this study upon which brand victims' reactions depend. For example, according to Bosnjak and Rudolph (2008), consumer reactions vary depending on their degree of involvement with brands. Consequently, the results may differ when comparing victims who support brands that sell high-involvement products (e.g., clothing) with those who support brands that sell low-involvement products (e.g., fast food). Moreover, brands with a high level of self-relevance are more likely to cause brand-related aggression than those low in self-relevance (Johnson, Matear, and Thomson 2011), hence in some online brand communities brand victimisation may be more common than in others, giving rise to the question whether degrees of tolerance vary by the frequency with which brand victimisation occurs.

3.6 Conclusion

This study examines the relatively unexplored context of cybervictimisation in online brand communities. We demonstrate that brand victimisation taking place in online brand communities has the potential to create negative effects on consumer behaviours such as PWOM intentions, community satisfaction and community following intentions. Our findings demonstrate that these negative effects vary depending on victimisation severity and bystander reactions. We offer a novel insight to both the digital marketing and

cybervictimisation literature by showing that, for severe cases of victimisation, pretending can lead to the least favourable victim reactions. Our findings, therefore, encourage firms to acknowledge the potential negative outcomes that brand victimisation has on the brand- and brand community-related behaviours, and to consider its CSR implications. Finally, we call for further research on the brand-related victimisation in online brand communities.

Appendix 3A. Introductory Scenario

In the beginning of the experiment, the entered brand name, Facebook name, and a positive comment were automatically forwarded into the scenarios as shown in the below figure. The scenario depicts a sample from a particular respondent. Names have been changed to pseudonyms for the purpose of anonymity.



Alex Brody They have great customer service and quality items. If you have never tried them, check them out!

Like · Reply · 7m

Appendix 3B. Experimental conditions and a control condition

B1. Severe victimisation & Reinforcing

Alex Brody They have great customer service and quality items. If you have never tried them, check them out!

Like · Reply · 7m

John Hope Shut up and talk to my fucking hand, Alex Brody!

Like · Reply · 5m

Kylie Baroux Alex Brody, are you serious!? You suck, moron!

Like · Reply · 2m

Tom Stanfield Yeah, fuck off Alex Brody!

Like · Reply · 1m

B2. Severe victimisation & Defending

Alex Brody They have great customer service and quality items. If you have never tried them, check them out!

Like · Reply · 7m

John Hope Shut up and talk to my fucking hand, Alex Brody!

Like · Reply · 5m

Kylie Baroux Alex Brody, are you serious!? You suck, moron!

Like · Reply · 2m

Tom Stanfield You both are really hateful. Leave Alex Brody alone!

Like · Reply · 1m

B3. Severe victimisation & Pretending

Alex Brody They have great customer service and quality items. If you have never tried them, check them out!

Like · Reply · 7m

John Hope Shut up and talk to my fucking hand, **Alex Brody**!

Like · Reply · 5m

Kylie Baroux Alex Brody, are you serious!? You suck, moron!

Like · Reply · 2m

Tom Stanfield Does anyone know the name of the song in the background?

Like · Reply · 1m

B4. Mild victimisation & Reinforcing

Alex Brody They have great customer service and quality items. If you have never tried them, check them out!

Like · Reply · 7m

John Hope You make me laugh so hard, **Alex Brody**. Such a joke! LMAO

Like · Reply · 5m

Kylie Baroux Haha, **Alex Brody**, you are not serious are you?? You joker :)

Like · Reply · 2m

Tom Stanfield I've heard better jokes before **Alex Brody** LOL

Like · Reply · 1m

B5. Mild victimisation & Defending

Alex Brody They have great customer service and quality items. If you have never tried them, check them out!

Like · Reply · 7m

John Hope You make me laugh so hard, **Alex Brody**. Such a joke! LMAO

Like · Reply · 5m

Kylie Baroux Haha, **Alex Brody**, you are not serious are you?? You joker :)

Like · Reply · 2m

Tom Stanfield Hey! no need to make fun of others. Leave **Alex Brody** alone guys!

Like · Reply · 1m

B6. Mild victimisation & Pretending

Alex Brody They have great customer service and quality items. If you have never tried them, check them out!

Like · Reply · 7m

John Hope You make me laugh so hard, **Alex Brody**. Such a joke! LMAO

Like · Reply · 5m

Kylie Baroux Haha, **Alex Brody**, you are not serious are you?? You joker :)

Like · Reply · 2m

Tom Stanfield Does anyone know the name of the song in the background?

Like · Reply · 1m

B7. Control condition

Alex Brody They have great customer service and quality items. If you have never tried them, check them out!

Like · Reply · 7m

John Hope Love it!

Like · Reply · 5m

Kylie Baroux Spot on Alex Brody! You are totally right.

Like · Reply · 2m

Tom Stanfield Couldn't agree more!

Like · Reply · 1m

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Chapter 4: Coping with Brand Victimisation – A Study on How Consumers Respond to Being Bullied in Online Brand Communities

Abstract

Members in online brand communities increasingly become victims of cyberbullying because of the brands they support, a phenomenon we term ‘Brand Victimisation’. Whilst recent studies have started to explore how cyberbullying (i.e., aggressive interactions between consumers on the Internet) affects onlookers, uninvolved community members, little is known about the impact it has on members who become victims. In particular, an understanding about how consumers respond to being bullied is helpful in providing insight that can help companies to manage their online brand communities and mitigate negative consequences that might occur.

Using a sample of 300 participants, and building on the theory of stress and coping (Lazarus and Folkman 1984), this study shows that the severity of brand victimisation influences a victim’s well-being and perceived company accountability, mediated by a victim’s emotional appraisal (anger and fear) and choice of coping strategy (retaliation and avoidance). We thus contribute an empirical model of brand victimisation as a novel consumer phenomenon to the online brand community literature. The findings also offer brand managers a first understanding of how brand victimisation can negatively affect brand followers in their online brand communities, and on the type of consumer coping strategies that they may like to encourage.

Keywords: Consumer misbehaviour; Consumer interactions; Online brand community; Social media; Brands; Coping; Cyberbullying

4.1 Introduction

Online brand communities are an important online marketing channel for companies. More than 70% of companies reported that online brand communities on social media significantly improve exposure, awareness, engagement, and credibility of their brands (Venngage 2019), and 50% of Internet users have followed brands on social media (Statusbrew 2019). However, recent studies suggest that interactions between brand followers in online brand communities increasingly turn hostile, wherein brand followers fall victim to being bullied by other brand followers (e.g., Breitsohl, Roschk, and Feyertag 2018; Ewing, Wagstaff, and Powell 2013). A survey of 4,248 American adults reported that 41% had been victims of cyberbullying, while 66% witnessed others being a target of cyberbullying (Pew Research Centre 2017). Research also shows a growing trend of cybervictimisation as the number of teens experiencing cybervictimisation rose from 32% in 2016 to over 50% in 2018 (Statista 2019). These statistics indicate that cyberbullying is a significant and growing problem online for consumers and also for brands.

Building on the cybervictimisation concept, we term the phenomenon whereby a consumer (a victim) is attacked by another brand follower (a bully) based on his/her verbal support for a particular brand in an online brand community as ‘Brand Victimisation’. Companies recognise the problem of brand victimisation, and it potentially causes a number of negative impacts upon brands. Coca-Cola, for instance, has experienced negative consequences caused by hostile interactions between brand followers in their online brand community on Facebook (Coca-Cola 2020). The company found that there were noticeable amounts of hostile comment, indicating cybervictimisation between consumers in the community. Such cybervictimisation caused the company to suspend advertising on every social media channel globally for a month, which negatively affected the brand and its online

marketing plan. Consequently, this made the company reassess its social media practices, aiming to drive the online brand community towards a safer, hate-free environment.

Another important issue that should be recognised is the impact of brand victimisation on victims. Cybervictimisation research indicates that being cyberbullied leads to negative consequences for victims. For instance, a meta-analysis by Kowalski et al. (2014) has shown that victims of cyberbullying commonly report higher levels of depression, anxiety, and stress. Likewise, marketing research has shown the negative impact that cybervictimisation has on justice perceptions of brand followers in online brand communities (Bacile et al. 2018).

Considering that brand victimisation is undesirable for both victims and companies, brand managers need to do something to mitigate the potential negative outcomes that may occur. Although addressing victimisation that occurs in company-hosted online brand communities tends to provide benefit to the brand, most companies decide not to get involved (Bacile et al. 2018). As such, this study proposes that an understanding about how consumers respond to being bullied is helpful in providing insights that can help companies to manage their online brand communities and mitigate negative consequences that might occur. In particular, the study aims to provide guidance on which type of coping strategy that brand managers should encourage consumers to use when dealing with bullying.

So far, the marketing literature has provided evidence that cybervictimisation occurs within online brand communities (Breitsohl, Roschk, and Feyertag 2018; Dineva, Breitsohl, and Garrod 2017; Ewing, Wagstaff, and Powell 2013; Husemann, Ladstaetter, and Luedicke 2015; Thomas, Price, and Schau 2013). Moreover, recent studies have shown that brand followers may become victimised by other brand followers because they are assumed to be brand rivals (Ilhan et al. 2018), complain about a product or service (Bacile et al. 2018), or

even without any obvious cause for provocation (Breitsohl, Roschk, and Feyertag 2018). Interestingly, extant research shows that brand victimisation can lead to both positive and negative outcomes (e.g., justice perceptions and consumer engagement). While Bacile et al. (2018) look at the negative outcomes in a customer complaint context and focus primarily on justice perceptions, Ilhan et al. (2018), on the other hand, emphasises the positive outcome in terms of social media engagement which focuses on the impact at the aggregate level. However, the studies that look at outcomes of brand victimisation are still limited, and little is known about the impact on victims. In particular, how victims feel, think about, cope with, and ultimately respond to being bullied by fellow brand followers in online brand communities is not well understood.

This study aims to address the gap in the literature by drawing on the theory of stress and coping (Lazarus and Folkman 1984). The study proposes that being bullied in an online brand community leads a victim to first engage in the emotional appraisal process. If an event is appraised as a threat or harm, it will then cause negative emotions to the victim. Subsequently, such negative emotions will activate coping mechanisms, which are expected to buffer the negative effects that the stressful situation has on the victim. As such, the present study aims to test the mediating effects of two negative emotions (anger and fear) and two specific coping strategies (retaliation and avoidance) on the relationship between brand victimisation and two outcome variables (negative well-being and perceived company accountability). Hypotheses are developed based on the theory of stress and coping (Lazarus and Folkman 1984) and empirical evidence from both the digital marketing and cybervictimisation literature. The hypotheses are tested by conducting a scenario-based experiment in which participants were exposed to a situation where they were victimised by

fellow brand followers in an online brand community. They then responded to a series of questions within a questionnaire to assess their responses.

The study contributes to the scarce knowledge of digital marketing research on brand victimisation in online brand communities and specifically expands the literature by focusing on the overlooked perspective of victims. Our findings contribute to marketing theory by offering an empirical model, which applies the theory of stress and coping (Lazarus and Folkman 1984) to the context of bullying in online brand communities. This is the first to offer insights on the negative psychological consequences of brand victimisation and on victims' reaction to being bullied by fellow brand followers in online brand communities. It is also the first to conceptualise the process that victims go through when being bullied in online brand communities. Given that brand victimisation can cause negative consequences to consumers and companies, as suggested by past research (Bacile et al. 2018), it is important to understand this process because it helps to understand why comments that are harmless banter for some consumers may be hurtful for others, and why victims respond to brand victimisation differently.

The study also contributes to the scarce quantitative research in the area by examining two possible negative outcomes of brand victimisation (negative well-being and perceived company accountability). The findings also highlight the importance of negative emotions (anger and fear) and coping strategy (retaliation and avoidance) as outlined in the psychology literature and expand our knowledge by applying such concepts within an online brand community context. Our empirical models further provide managerially relevant insights that help brand managers to understand how victims cope with being bullied in online brand communities, encourage companies to detect brand victimisation in their online brand

communities, as well as provide guidance on which type of coping strategy that should be encouraged in order to mitigate the negative effects of brand victimisation.

This remainder of the article is structured as follows. First, we provide conceptual background on brand victimisation, followed by hypothesis development. The methodology is then explained including the experimental design and data collection, followed by an outline of the results. The study then concludes by discussing the contributions of the research, its limitations and some avenues for future research.

4.2 Literature review

4.2.1 Brand victimisation

The online phenomenon when brand followers attack one another in online brand communities is generally related to cyberbullying and cybervictimisation, which are established terms in the psychology literature. Cyberbullying is described as “the use of electronic communication technologies to bully others” (Kowalski et al. 2014, p. 1074). From the perspective of the victim, researchers use the term cybervictimisation to describe the process when an individual is the target of threatening, offensive, or hostile messages/comments through the Internet (Alvarez-García et al. 2017). Furthermore, research suggests that individuals may become a victim of cyberbullying due to identity-central factors such as physical appearance (e.g., weight and skin colour) or socio-demographic background (e.g., race and sexual orientation) (Costello et al. 2016). In addition, marketing researchers such as Breitsohl, Roschk and Feyertag (2018) suggest that brands represent a similar characteristic that leads to an individual becoming the target of cyberbullying. Because brands are important to individual’s self-concept, people tend to identify, use, and

form stronger relationships with brands that have characteristics relating to themselves (Stokburger-Sauer, Ratneshwar, and Sen 2012). In the context of this research, we focus on a phenomenon we term ‘Brand Victimisation’, which describes a phenomenon whereby a consumer is attacked by other brand followers, becoming a victim due to his/her verbal support for a particular brand in online brand communities.

4.2.2 Evidence of brand victimisation in the marketing literature

Past marketing research has provided evidence showing that cyberbullying occurs between brand followers in online brand communities. Breitsohl, Roschk, and Feyertag (2018) conducted a netnographic investigation of four online brand communities on Facebook (i.e., Burger King, Domino’s Pizza, Dolce & Gabbana, and Starbucks) and identified different types of ‘consumer brand bullying behaviour’ such as harassment, trolling and teasing. Golf-Papez and Veer (2017) also provide evidence of trolling that occurred in online brand communities. Moreover, marketing researchers have also provided evidence of other hostile behaviours that are similar to cybervictimisation, yet occur in a specific context. Bacile et al. (2018) investigate an online phenomenon called ‘consumer-to-consumer (C2C) incivility’, and the research shows that making a complaint through an online brand community may cause a complainant to get bullied by other brand followers due to different views of the members who have complained. Such bullying behaviours are also related to ‘C2C conflicts’, which often involve the intention of a brand follower to harm, provoke, or harass others (Dineva, Breitsohl, and Garrod 2017; Husemann, Ladstaetter, and Luedicke 2015; Luedicke, Thompson, and Giesler 2010; Thomas, Price, and Schau 2013). Berendt, Uhrich, and Thompson (2018) investigated a similar phenomenon that refers to as ‘inter-consumer brand rivalry’. Brand followers may become victimised because they post

comments to support their favourite brands and get attacked by the fans of rival brands (e.g., McDonald's vs Burger King, Coke vs Pepsi) (Ewing, Wagstaff, and Powell 2013; Hickman and Ward 2007; Ilhan, Kübler, and Pauwels 2018).

4.2.3 Consequences of brand victimisation

This study investigates two key consequences of brand victimisation. First, it emphasises the negative impact of brand victimisation on the psychological well-being of victims, which has been a key theme of research on cybervictimisation (Hoff and Mitchell 2009; Slonje, Smith, and Frisé 2013). A meta-analysis by Kowalski et al. (2014) has shown that depression, anxiety, and stress are major negative well-being outcomes of cybervictimisation as commonly reported by victims. The victims tend to feel emotionally unwell after being bullied and experience emotional distress (Ortega et al. 2009). Likewise, we speculate that brand victimisation can cause negative impact on well-being for victims as well. We focus on this outcome variable because it represents an established construct that has been shown as an important outcome of being cyberbullied in extant works, allowing us to assess the impact of cybervictimisation in the context of online brand community.

The study further looks at the negative impact of brand victimisation on the company as well. Although the verbal attack can be hurtful to victims, which potentially causes a detrimental impact on brands and communities, many companies decided not to do or say anything about it. As pointed out by Bacile et al. (2018), online observation shows that most companies did not address hostile interactions between brand followers that occurred in their hosted online brand communities. Although addressing the hostile interactions between brand followers in online brand communities tends to provide benefits to companies rather than harm, companies might decide not to get involved in the victimisation process just to

avoid the risk of companies getting attacked (Dineva, Breitsohl, and Garrod 2017; Dineva et al. 2020). As such, this study aims to further investigate how victims respond to being bullied affects how they perceive towards company accountability (i.e., a perception that a company should be held accountable to address the victimisation that occurs in an online brand community). This outcome variable is important for companies because understanding how victims assign accountability to companies can help them to decide a strategy for mitigating the negative consequences that might cause by brand victimisation.

4.2.4 Hypothesis development

The theory of stress and coping (Lazarus and Folkman 1984) explains how individuals evaluate and cope with stressful situations. The theory illustrates that individuals engage in the appraisal process when exposing to stressful situations and subsequently react to such situations through coping mechanisms. In the cyberbullying context, researchers adapted the theory of stress and coping to investigate the effects of cyberbullying on victims and examine how victims respond to the incident through negative emotions and cope with the incidents using coping strategies (Camacho, Hassanein, and Head 2018; Raskauskas and Huynh 2015).

The theory has also been used in past consumer research as well. For instance, Stephens and Gwinner (1998) used the theory to model consumer complaint behaviour and investigate how consumers appraise the stressful situation (i.e., dissatisfying product or service experience) and cope with negative emotions through complaint. Likewise, Breitsohl and Garrod (2016) investigated how tourists react to an unethical destination incident (i.e., incident involving an inappropriate behaviour of a security staff at the airport) through

negative emotions and cope with such emotions using coping strategies including avoidance and spread negative word-of-mouth.

Because brand victimisation is likely to cause negative consequences for victims (Kowalski et al. 2014), the theory of stress and coping (Lazarus and Folkman 1984) is appropriate to guide how victims respond to being bullied in online brand communities, which is conceptualised and illustrated in the Figure 4.1. Thus, the present study aims to assess the mediation effects of emotional appraisal and coping strategy on the relationship between brand victimisation and outcome variables.

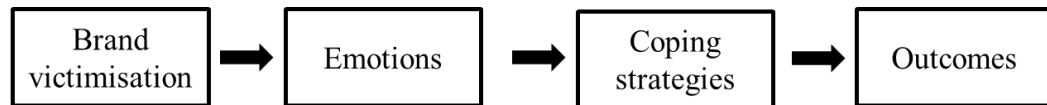


Figure 4.1 Conceptual model of a victim's reactions to a brand victimisation incident
(Author 2020)

4.2.4.1 Emotional appraisal

The theory of stress and coping suggests that individuals will first respond to a stressful situation by engaging in the appraisal process – a process described as “an evaluative process that determines why and to what extent a particular transaction or series of transactions between the person and the environment is stressful” (Lazarus and Folkman 1984, p. 19). The first stage of appraisal is a primary appraisal of the stressor, which refers to “judgments that a transaction is irrelevant, benign-positive, or stressful” (Folkman 1984, p. 840). If the situation is evaluated as stressful (e.g., harmful or threatening), the individuals

will enter the secondary appraisal stage (i.e., coping selection process), where they assess coping options in order to deal with the situation.

Based on the empirical evidence from cybervictimisation studies, a stressful appraisal during a brand victimisation incident can be identified by negative emotions such as anger and fear (Keith 2018; Ortega et al. 2009). Researchers identified that victims commonly reported anger as an emotional reaction to cybervictimisation (Ak, Özdemir, and Kuzucu 2015; Patchin and Hinduja 2006). Moreover, victims also reported high levels of fear when being cybervictimised (Hoff and Mitchell 2009; Keith 2018). We chose anger and fear as our focus concerning cognitive appraisal because the precedents in the literature show that these two emotions are typical negative emotions reported by victims of cyberbullying (Bauman 2010; Kowalski et al. 2014). Importantly, anger and fear represent opposite psychological state (Lebel 2017; Singh et al. 2018; Stephens and Gwinner 1998), allowing us to compare the mediation effects between two distinct emotions and provide insights on how such different emotions trigger different coping strategies. Hence, this research particularly aims to assess how anger and fear influence coping behaviours of victims. We speculate that a victim who perceives that the victimisation is a threat or harm will be more likely to feel anger and/or fear than those who perceive the victimisation as normal, and such stressful appraisal will activate the coping mechanisms of victims.

In addition, a factor that potentially moderates how victims feel towards being bullied is bystander reactions (Bastiaensens et al. 2014). We focus on this moderator because the evidence from past research shows that cybervictimisation process on social media generally involves bystanders who witness the incident and may decide to get involved (Holfeld 2014; Salmivalli 2010), and this typically occurs in online brand communities too (Breitsohl, Roschk, and Feyertag 2018; Dineva, Breitsohl, and Garrod 2017). It is important to

understand whether reactions from other brand followers in online brand communities affect how victims respond to being bullied through negative emotions. We speculate that a supportive bystander reaction (i.e., defending the victim) is likely to buffer the negative impact of brand victimisation on anger and fear compared to when a bystander is reinforcing the bully or pretending that no victimisation occurred (Sainio et al. 2010). Thus, we put forward that:

H1: Bystander reactions moderate the effects of brand victimisation on anger and fear, in which defending weaken such effects, whereas reinforcing and pretending strengthen such effects

4.2.4.2 Coping strategy

Coping is seen to be the actions taken by individuals to handle stressful situations (Pearlin and Schooler 1978). People use different coping strategies depending on how they evaluate the situation and their controllability towards the stressor (Lazarus and Folkman 1984). Coping can be simply categorised into problem-focused and emotion-focused, and this two-dimensional coping approach is one of the most common coping structures that can be seen in the coping literature (Skinner et al. 2003). Problem-focused coping refers to “coping aimed at managing the problem causing the stress”, whereas emotion-focused coping refers to “coping aimed at regulating emotional responses to the stress” (Duhachek and Oakley 2007, p. 222). In particular, this study emphasises two different coping strategies which are retaliation (problem-focused) and avoidance (emotion-focused). We focus on these two coping strategies because both strategies are commonly used by victims when being cyberbullied, which also represent two distinct coping approaches (Machackova et al. 2013), allowing us to compare the buffering effects between two opposite coping strategies.

Retaliation is defined as “an aggressive act committed in response to a threat to a person's physical, social, or emotional well-being” (Frey, Pearson, and Cohen 2015, p. 25). This strategy is categorised as problem-focused coping because the action is directed at a bully. It is one of the most common coping strategies that victims would adopt when being bullied online (Konig et al. 2010; Machmutow et al. 2012). Victims decide to get back at the bullies by returning offensive messages (Beran and Li 2007). According to the theory of stress and coping (Lazarus and Folkman 1984), negative emotions are triggered when the victimisation is perceived as a threat or harm which subsequently leads to an act of retaliation. This act of retaliation serves to counteract negative feelings such as anger that caused by being bullied (Beran and Li 2007; Grégoire, Laufer, and Tripp 2010). Research also emphasises that victims who have a high level of anger are more likely to retaliate against the bullies (Camodeca and Goossens 2005; Keith 2018).

Avoidance is defined as “attempts to escape stressful conditions by physically or mentally withdrawing from the source of stress” (Duhachek and Oakley 2007, p. 222). It is considered as emotion-focused coping because individuals can manage negative emotions and get emotional relief by avoiding the source of the problem (Folkman et al. 1986). Past research has shown the use of an avoidance strategy by victims to cope with being bullied (Kochenderfer-Ladd and Skinner 2002; Machmutow et al. 2012). Victims can manage their negative emotions by avoiding the bullies, leaving the website, or turning to something else. Furthermore, researchers have verified the link between negative emotions and avoidance (Gordon 1998; Roseman, Wiest, and Swartz 1994). Specifically, victims who have a high level of fear are more likely to avoid or stay away from bullies (Bay and Algase 1999; Keith 2018).

In a consumer context, researchers found that an emotion-focused coping strategy (i.e., avoidance) is effective in dealing with service failure as consumers reported higher satisfaction, purchase intentions, and positive word-of-mouth intentions compared to using a problem-focused coping strategy (e.g., complaining about the problem) (Gabbott, Tsarenko, and Mok 2011; Sengupta et al. 2015). In contrast, some researchers argued that problem-focused coping can be more effective when dealing with such negative events. Strizhakova, Tsarenko, and Ruth (2012) found that consumers effectively deal with service failure by using problem solving strategies as they reported higher service continuation intentions and positive word-of-mouth intentions compared to using avoidance strategies. Likewise, cybervictimisation studies indicate that even the same coping strategy can lead to opposite outcomes. For instance, it is found that victims who used avoidance strategy were encountering high levels of depression and anxiety (Na, Dancy, and Park 2015; Völlink et al. 2013), whereas some studies found that using avoidance strategy could reduce such emotional distress (Machackova et al. 2013; Parris et al. 2012). In the same way, while it is found that victims who retaliated at bullies were more likely to experience high depression (Machmutow et al. 2012; Na, Dancy, and Park 2015), some studies have shown that using retaliation strategy could counter the negative emotions and sometimes stop the bullying (Beran and Li 2007; Camodeca and Goossens 2005). This study, therefore, addresses the contradictory findings by assessing the buffering effects of two distinct coping strategies in the context of brand victimisation in online brand communities.

Building on the theory of stress and coping (Lazarus and Folkman 1984), this research proposes that there are indirect effects of brand victimisation on negative well-being and perceived company accountability through the variation of negative emotions (anger and fear) and coping strategies (retaliation and avoidance). That is, a severe versus mild

victimisation causes negative emotions of anger and fear to a victim, these levels of anger and fear subsequently affect how the victim copes with the incident, and the different types of coping strategy will ultimately affect how the victim perceive about his/her well-being and company accountability. Thus, we hypothesise:

- H2:** Anger and retaliation mediate the effect of victimisation severity on (a) negative well-being and (b) perceived company accountability.
- H3:** Anger and avoidance mediate the effect of victimisation severity on (a) negative well-being and (b) perceived company accountability.
- H4:** Fear and retaliation mediate the effect of victimisation severity on (a) negative well-being and (b) perceived company accountability.
- H5:** Fear and avoidance mediate the effect of victimisation severity on (a) negative well-being and (b) perceived company accountability.

4.3 Method

To test the hypotheses, participants were exposed to a scenario which outlined a situation whereby a consumer is bullied by fellow brand followers after posting a comment to support a brand in an online brand community. This was to simulate a typical brand victimisation incident that might be seen in online brand communities. Following previous research (e.g., Breitsohl and Garrod 2016; Gao et al. 2013), scenarios were designed in close relation to real-life situations taken from online brand communities on Facebook to make the research more realistic. A scenario-based experiment was deemed suitable for this study because it enabled a scenario to be designed to replicate a specific context of brand victimisation. This scenario based approach also provides the ability to control otherwise unmanageable variables (Bitner 1990). Importantly, this method allows participants to

evaluate the same situation and respond to it under the same circumstances rather than to imagine about their past experiences, which helps minimise bias in terms of memory lapse that may confound a more natural situation (McCollough, Berry, and Yadav 2000; Smith and Bolton 1998). The scenario-based experiment has also been used by other studies in the area to test similar effects (e.g., Bacile et al. 2018; Bastiaensens et al. 2014; Obermaier, Fawzi, and Koch 2014). After exposure to the cybervictimisation scenario subjects were asked a series of questions based around the constructs being investigated.

4.3.1 Design and participants

To perform the study a 2 (Victimisation severity: Severe vs Mild) x 3 (Bystander reactions: Reinforcing vs Defending vs Pretending) between-subjects factorial design with a control group was set up. As suggested by Barratt, Ferris, and Lenton (2015), we followed a purposive sampling approach and employed an online data panel provider to recruit participants targeting brand followers who reported being victims in the past. While many experimental studies rely on participants' ability to imagine themselves in a fictitious study setting (e.g., Bacile et al. 2018; Obermaier, Fawzi, and Koch 2014), the target population, as defined in this study (i.e., brand followers who had been victims in the past), helped to further minimise bias that might be caused by participants who had not been involved in such a situation before. Because victims are a hard-to-reach target population, due to reluctance of wanting to recall a distressing experience (Gosling and Mason 2015), a purposive sampling approach and the use of an online panel were deemed appropriate for the study.

Respondents were identified through a series of screening questions at the beginning of the survey: (1) Do you like or follow the fanpage of any brand on Facebook?, (2) How often do you post brand-related comments on Facebook fanpages? and (3) How often have

others replied with negative comments to your brand-related posts? Participants who answered ‘No’ for the first question and ‘Never’ for the second or third question were not allowed to complete the experiment. We focus on Facebook fanpages as the online brand community context here because Facebook is the most popular social media platform among internet users with over 2.4 billion daily active users (Smart Insights 2020), and is the most popular social media platform for hosting online brand communities rated by companies (Statista 2020).

To ensure the quality of the data, participants further had to correctly complete an attention check question, which was measured with the item “It is important for us that you pay attention to this study. Please tick 'Neither agree nor disagree'.”, embedded in the questionnaire in order for their data to be considered as usable. Additionally, gibberish text entry responses that participants entered into the required text boxes were considered as further criterion for exclusion. Those who failed these quality criteria were excluded from the study leading to a final sample of 300 participants, of which 67% were female and the majority (60%) were aged between 25-54 years.

4.3.2 Manipulation of independent variables

To start the experiment, participants were asked to enter the name of their favourite brand that they had ‘liked’ or ‘followed’ on Facebook into a textbox, as well as the Facebook name into another textbox. These entered names were “piped” into the scenarios and some measurement scales in order to enhance the realism of the scenario and the relevance of scale items. The scenario started by showing participants the Facebook fanpage of their favourite brand, in which they saw the latest video advertisement posted by the brand. Then, they were asked to make a positive comment about it. Participants were asked to make a positive

comment for three reasons. First, since they were asked to enter a name of their favourite brand, a positive statement to support the brand would more closely resemble participants' actual predisposition towards the brand, rather than asking them to imagine being complainants or brand rivals who are likely to make a negative statement. Second, portraying the victim as a brand supporter rather than complainant or brand rival allows us to control for the noise effects that may be caused by justice perception towards the complaint or attitude towards brand rivals of the participants. Lastly, unprovoked attacks on brand supporters have been a frequently occurring online phenomenon (Cole and West 2016), thus allowing us to observe consumer reactions to a real-life trend in social media related to the incident of trolling.

Subsequently, participants received a notification showing that other brand followers had responded to the comment they made on the video advertisement, and participants were then channelled towards the first manipulation (i.e., victimisation severity), in which they were randomly allocated to one of three conditions: (1) severe victimisation, (2) mild victimisation and (3) no victimisation (control condition). Following Obermaier, Fawzi, and Koch (2014), the severe victimisation scenario contained a brand follower who bullied a victim by using swearwords and no signs of humour, whereas the mild victimisation scenario contained a comment that included elements of humour and no swearwords. For the control condition, there was no victimisation present and all the seen comments were positive. Next, participants were channelled towards the second manipulation (i.e., bystander reactions), in which they were randomly exposed to one of three conditions: (1) bystanders reinforcing the bullying comments towards the participants, (2) bystanders defending the participants and (3) bystanders pretending that nothing happened. Finally, participants were channelled towards the scale items, which also included manipulation check and attention check items.

All the scenarios were pre-tested to ensure that participants understood the manipulation as intended and that the scenarios were realistic. We asked participants to rate the realism of the scenarios (“The described scenario is realistic”) on a 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree) Likert scale, following Breitsohl and Garrod (2016). The results indicate that the scenarios were viewed realistically ($M = 5.41$, $SD = 1.47$).

4.3.3 Measures

Measures of the dependent variables were adopted from established scales in the literature and were anchored on seven-point Likert scales (1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree). Anger was measured using a 3-item scale taken from Bougie, Pieters, and Zeelenberg (2003). The scale for fear was adopted from Laros and Steenkamp (2005) and contained six items. Retaliation was measured with a 6-item scale used by Grégoire and Fisher (2006). The scale for avoidance was measured using a 3-item scale taken from Skinner et al. (2003). Perceived company accountability was measured using a 3-item scale adapted from McCollough, Berry, and Yadav (2000). Negative well-being (Depression, Anxiety, and Stress) was measured with the DASS-21 scale developed by Lovibond and Lovibond (1995). Some items were modified to fit the context of the study. For instance, with the retaliation scale by Grégoire and Fisher (2006), the term ‘organisation’ was changed to ‘some of those who commented on my post’. The actual name of the brand was also piped into the scale items when measuring perceived company accountability to ensure participants answer questions about their favourite brands, rather than social media provider (i.e., Facebook). Table 4.1 shows measurement items, loadings, and Cronbach’s alpha for each variable.

Table 4.1 Measurement items

| Variable | Item | Loadings | α |
|-------------------------------------|---|----------|----------|
| | <i>Looking at these comments, I would likely be ...</i> | | |
| Anger | Angry | .94 | .92 |
| | Enraged | .89 | |
| | Mad | .94 | |
| Fear | Scared | .88 | .94 |
| | Afraid | .91 | |
| | Panicky | .93 | |
| | Nervous | .92 | |
| | Worried | .93 | |
| | Tense | .72 | |
| | <i>Looking at these comments, I would be likely to ...</i> | | |
| Retaliation | Do something bad to some of those who commented on my post. | .88 | .95 |
| | Take actions to get some of those who commented on my post into trouble. | .79 | |
| | Cause inconvenience to some of those who commented on my post. | .90 | |
| | Punish some of those who commented on my post. | .94 | |
| | Make some of those who commented on my post get what they deserve. | .94 | |
| | Get even with some of those who commented on my post. | .92 | |
| Avoidance | Take my mind off of the situation. | .92 | .86 |
| | Refuse to think about it too much. | .84 | |
| | Turn to work or other activities to take my mind off things. | .90 | |
| | <i>Looking at these comments, ...</i> | | |
| Perceived company accountability | I would expect that [brand] would take some action to moderate the situation. | .96 | .94 |
| | I would expect that [brand] would do whatever it takes to moderate the situation. | .96 | |
| | I would not expect [brand] to get involved in the situation. (R) | .92 | |
| Negative well-being (Depression) | I would feel downhearted and blue. | .66 | .95 |
| | I would feel like I have nothing to look forward to. | .92 | |
| | I would feel that life is meaningless. | .91 | |
| | I would feel like I am not worth much as a person. | .93 | |
| | I would have difficulty becoming enthusiastic about almost anything. | .93 | |
| | I would not seem to experience any positive feeling at all. | .90 | |
| | I would find it difficult to work up the initiative to do things. | .94 | |

| | | | |
|----------------------------------|---|-----|-----|
| Negative well-being (Anxiety) | I would be aware of the action of my heart in the absence of physical exertion (e.g., heart racing, skipping a beat). | .69 | .93 |
| | I would experience dryness in my mouth. | .82 | |
| | I would experience difficulty breathing (e.g. excessively rapid breathing, breathlessness in the absence of physical exertion). | .89 | |
| | I would experience trembling (e.g. in the hands). | .90 | |
| | I would worry about situations in which I might panic and make a fool of myself. | .88 | |
| | I would feel close to panic. | .91 | |
| | I would feel scared without any good reason. | .89 | |
| Negative well-being (Stress) | I would find it hard to wind down. | .93 | .97 |
| | I would find it difficult to relax. | .92 | |
| | I would have a lot of nervous energy to expend. | .90 | |
| | I would find myself easily agitated. | .92 | |
| | I would tend to over-react to situations. | .91 | |
| | I would tend to be rather touchy. | .93 | |
| | I would quickly become intolerant of anything that keeps me from getting on with what I am doing. | .86 | |

Note: “[brand]” was replaced by the actual name of the brand provided in the piped text box.

4.4 Data analysis and results

To ensure participants perceived the manipulations as intended, victimisation severity was measured with the item “The comments from John Hope and Kylie Baroux were meant to be hostile”, adapted from Ordoñez and Nekmat (2019). A one-way Welch ANOVA (Welch's $F(2, 253.18) = 1317.83, p < .001$) indicates significant differences when comparing severe victimisation ($M = 6.39, SD = 1.00$), mild victimisation ($M = 4.44, SD = 1.77$), and the control group ($M = 1.32, SD = 0.52$). Games-Howell post hoc analysis revealed significant differences between the control group and mild victimisation (mean difference = 3.12, $SE = .15, p < .001$), the control group and severe victimisation (mean difference = 5.07, $SE = .10, p < .001$), as well as the mild victimisation and severe victimisation (mean difference = 1.94, $SE = .16, p < .001$). Thus, the manipulation of victimisation severity was confirmed.

Following León, Nouwen, and Sheffield (2007), bystander reactions were measured with the item “Tom Stanfield's comment was meant to support you”. The manipulation was confirmed by a one-way Welch ANOVA (Welch's $F(2, 143.05) = 297.62, p < .001$), indicating that participants perceived bystander reactions to be significantly different across the three conditions: reinforcing ($M = 2.12, SD = 1.62$), defending ($M = 6.30, SD = 1.09$), and pretending ($M = 3.81, SD = 1.52$). Games-Howell post hoc analysis reported significant differences between reinforcing and pretending (mean difference = 1.69, $SE = .25, p < .001$), reinforcing and defending (mean difference = 4.19, $SE = .18, p < .001$), as well as pretending and defending (mean difference = 2.49, $SE = .23, p < .001$).

The data was analysed using the PROCESS Macro for SPSS version 3.3 (Hayes 2018), as H1 concerned a moderating variable and H2 to H5 serial multiple mediation with multiple mediators and multiple dependent variables. As such, eight serial multiple mediation models were developed in which the models A1–A4 focus on negative well-being as the outcome variable (Figure 4.2–4.5) and models B1–B4 focus on perceived company accountability as the outcome variable (Figure 4.6–4.9). Specifically, the moderation (H1) was tested using Model 1 and the serial multiple mediation (H2–H5) was tested using Model 6, with 5,000 bootstrap samples. Model 6 is an appropriate model to test serial multiple mediation effects because it allows us to test two mediators simultaneously, with one mediator being a cause of the other (Preacher, Rucker, and Hayes 2007). Besides running PROCESS to assess indirect effects of independent variable on dependent variables through mediators, we followed Whitley, Trudel, and Kurt (2018) by running ANOVA to assess whether two victimisation conditions (i.e., severe vs mild) have significantly different effects towards each of the dependent variables separately.

4.4.1 Moderating effect of bystander reactions

The moderating effects of bystander reactions on the relationship between victimisation severity and cognitive appraisal (anger and fear) were first examined. Results from PROCESS (model 1 with 5,000 bootstrap samples) revealed non-significant interaction effects between victimisation severity and bystander reactions on both anger ($b = .00$, $t(296) = .00$, $p = .99$) and fear ($b = -.07$, $t(296) = -.35$, $p = .73$). Likewise, results revealed non-significant interaction effects between victimisation severity and bystander reactions on both coping and outcome variables as well. Thus, H1 is not supported and the moderator was therefore omitted from the further analysis.

4.4.2 Anger

ANOVA results indicate that participants in the severe condition perceived higher anger than those in the mild condition ($M_{\text{severe}} = 4.69$, $SD = 1.64$ vs. $M_{\text{mild}} = 3.22$, $SD = 1.54$; $F(1, 298) = 64.44$, $p < .001$). Moreover, bivariate OLS regression shows that victimisation severity had a positive and significant effect on anger ($b = 1.48$, $SE = .18$, $p < .001$).

4.4.3 Fear

ANOVA results indicate that participants in the severe condition perceived higher fear than those in the mild condition ($M_{\text{severe}} = 2.73$, $SD = 1.49$ vs. $M_{\text{mild}} = 2.10$, $SD = 1.20$; $F(1, 298) = 16.74$, $p < .001$). Results from bivariate OLS regression also show that victimisation severity had a positive and significant effect on fear ($b = .64$, $SE = .16$, $p < .001$).

4.4.4 Retaliation

Results from ANOVA show that participants in the severe condition were more likely to take revenge after being bullied than those in the mild condition ($M_{\text{severe}} = 2.35$, $SD = 1.39$ vs. $M_{\text{mild}} = 1.97$, $SD = 1.29$; $F(1, 298) = 5.86$, $p = .02$). Furthermore, bivariate OLS regression results show that anger ($b = .21$, $SE = .05$, $p < .001$) and fear ($b = .43$, $SE = .05$, $p < .001$) had positive and significant effects on retaliation, while victimisation severity had non-significant effect.

4.4.5 Avoidance

ANOVA shows a non-significant effect of victimisation severity on participants' decision to employ avoidance strategy ($M_{\text{severe}} = 5.16$, $SD = 1.42$ vs. $M_{\text{mild}} = 4.82$, $SD = 1.68$; $F(1, 298) = 3.72$, $p = .06$). Results from bivariate OLS regression further indicate that only anger ($b = .13$, $SE = .06$, $p = .02$) had a positive and significant effect on avoidance, whereas fear and victimisation severity had non-significant effect.

4.4.6 Negative well-being (Model A1–A4)

As expected, ANOVA results indicate that participants in the severe condition had higher negative well-being than those in the mild condition ($M_{\text{severe}} = 2.55$, $SD = 1.37$ vs. $M_{\text{mild}} = 2.23$, $SD = 1.16$; $F(1, 298) = 4.77$, $p = .03$). With anger in the model (Model A1 and A2), the regression further revealed that retaliation ($b = .38$, $SE = .05$, $p < .001$) had positive and significant effects on negative well-being (Figure 4.2), whereas avoidance ($b = -.18$, $SE = .04$, $p < .001$) had a negative and significant effect (Figure 4.3).

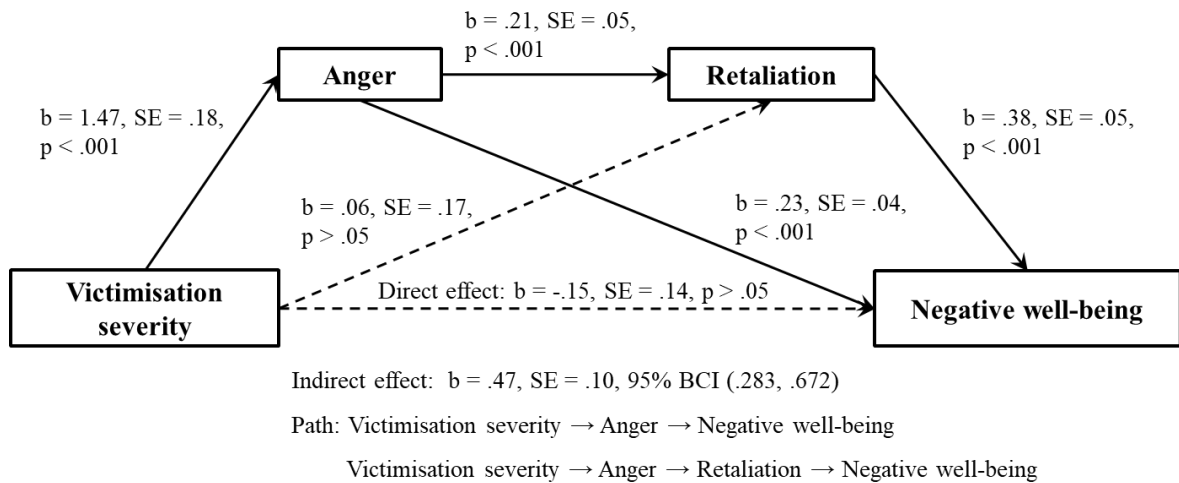


Figure 4.2 Model A1

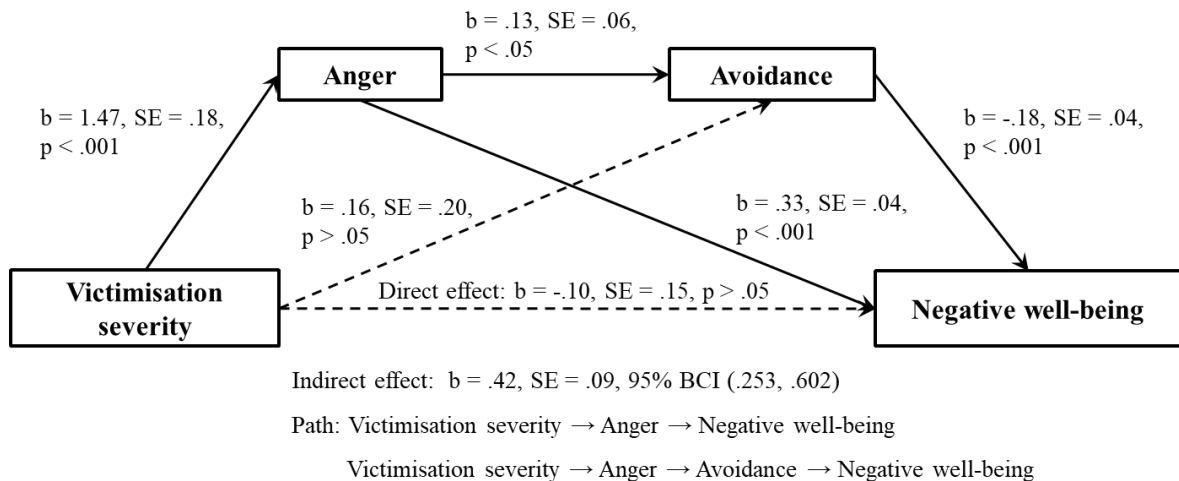


Figure 4.3 Model A2

With fear in the model (Model A3 and A4), the regression results show that retaliation ($b = .23$, $SE = .05$, $p < .001$) had positive and significant effects on negative well-being (Figure 4.4), whereas avoidance ($b = -.10$, $SE = .04$, $p = .01$) had a negative and significant effect (Figure 4.5).

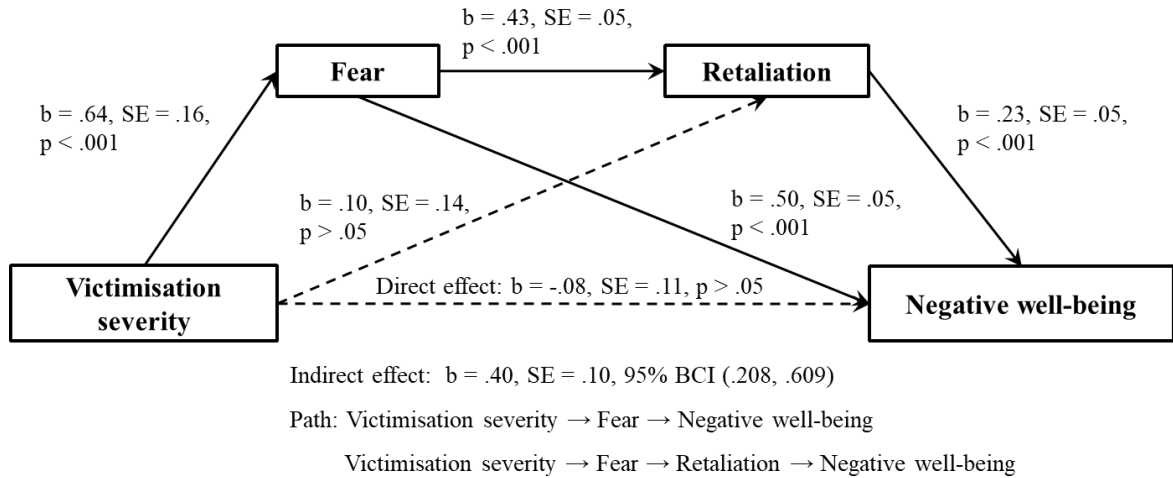


Figure 4.4 Model A3

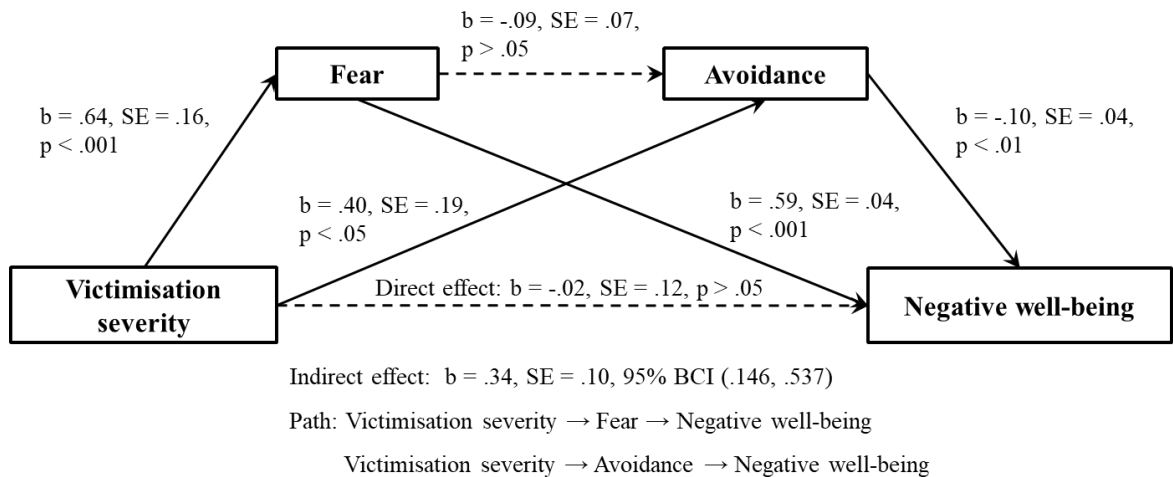


Figure 4.5 Model A4

4.4.7 Perceived company accountability (Model B1–B4)

ANOVA results indicate that participants in the severe condition had higher perceived company accountability than those in the mild condition ($M_{\text{severe}} = 4.50$, $SD = 1.75$ vs. $M_{\text{mild}} = 3.51$, $SD = 1.65$; $F(1, 298) = 25.69$, $p < .001$). With anger in the model (Model B1 and B2), the regression further revealed that retaliation ($b = .24$, $SE = .07$, $p = .001$) had

positive and significant effects on perceived company accountability (Figure 4.6), whereas avoidance had non-significant effect (Figure 4.7).

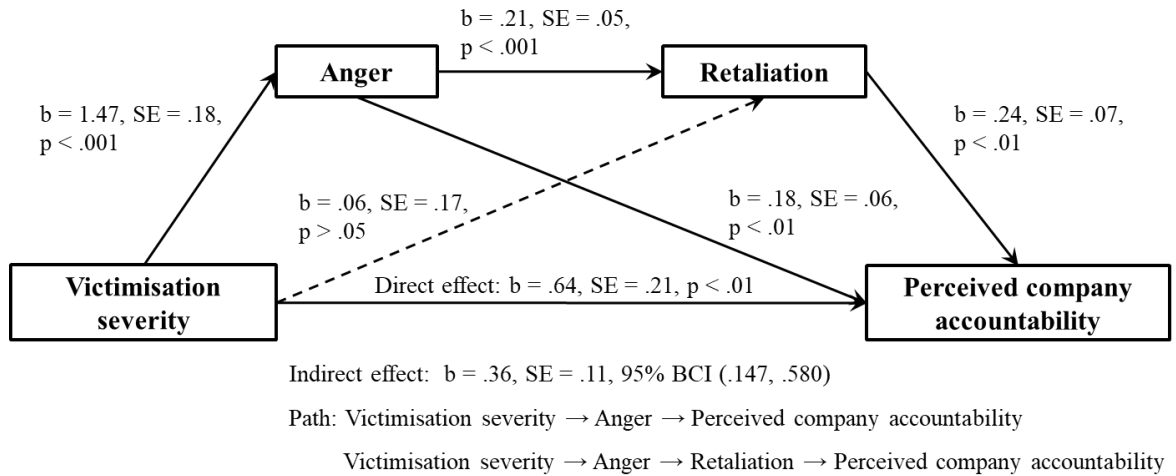


Figure 4.6 Model B1

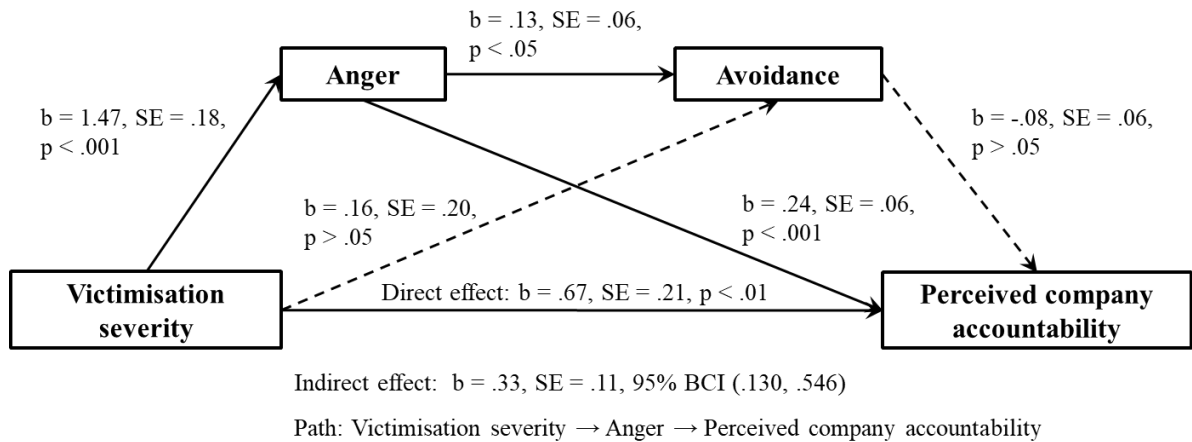


Figure 4.7 Model B2

With fear in the model (Model B3 and B4), the regression results show that retaliation ($b = .25$, $SE = .08$, $p = .002$) had positive and significant effects on perceived company accountability (Figure 4.8), while avoidance had a non-significant effect (Figure 4.9).

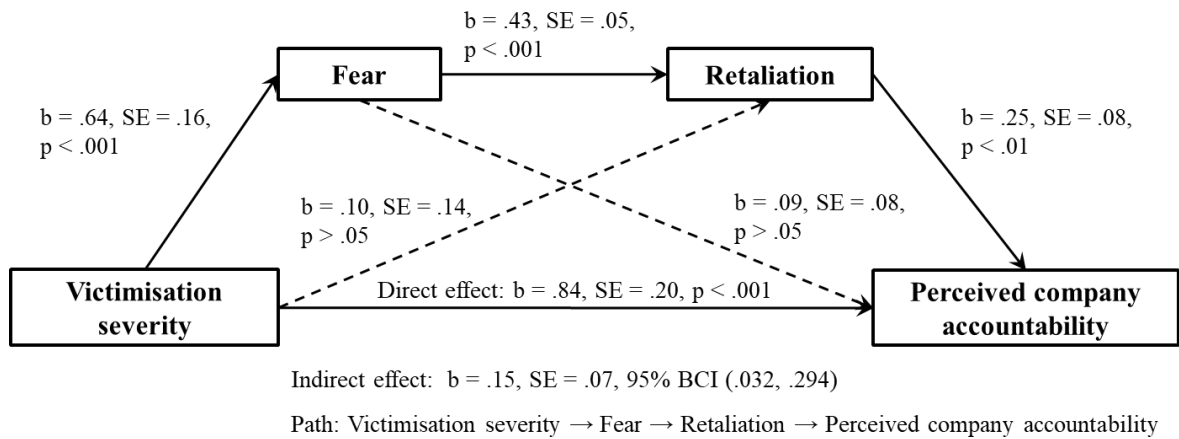


Figure 4.8 Model B3

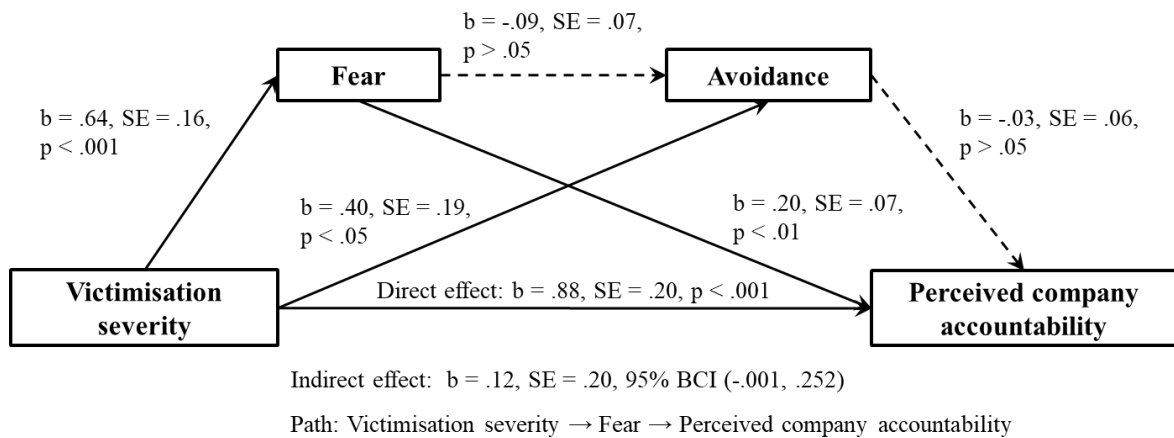


Figure 4.9 Model B4

4.4.8 Mediation analysis

To confirm the mediating pathway from victimisation severity to negative emotions to coping strategies to outcomes, serial multiple mediator analysis using PROCESS model 6 with 5,000 bootstrap samples was utilised. Table 4.2 shows beta and confident intervals of each mediating path.

Table 4.2 Beta and confidence intervals for each mediating path

| Model | Path | b | 95% CI | |
|-------|---|------|--------|-------|
| | | | LLCI | ULCI |
| A1 | Victimisation severity → Anger → Negative well-being | .33 | .198 | .486 |
| | Victimisation severity → Retaliation → Negative well-being | .02 | -.102 | .149 |
| | Victimisation severity → Anger → Retaliation → Negative well-being | .12 | .058 | .195 |
| A2 | Victimisation severity → Anger → Negative well-being | .49 | .329 | .658 |
| | Victimisation severity → Avoidance → Negative well-being | -.03 | -.099 | .042 |
| | Victimisation severity → Anger → Avoidance → Negative well-being | -.04 | -.081 | -.001 |
| A3 | Victimisation severity → Fear → Negative well-being | .32 | .159 | .489 |
| | Victimisation severity → Retaliation → Negative well-being | .02 | -.041 | .091 |
| | Victimisation severity → Fear → Retaliation → Negative well-being | .06 | .025 | .117 |
| A4 | Victimisation severity → Fear → Negative well-being | .37 | .188 | .562 |
| | Victimisation severity → Avoidance → Negative well-being | -.04 | -.090 | -.004 |
| | Victimisation severity → Fear → Avoidance → Negative well-being | .01 | -.002 | .018 |
| B1 | Victimisation severity → Anger → Perceived company accountability | .27 | .070 | .489 |
| | Victimisation severity → Retaliation → Perceived company accountability | .01 | -.067 | .097 |
| | Victimisation severity → Anger → Retaliation → Perceived company accountability | .08 | .027 | .135 |
| B2 | Victimisation severity → Anger → Perceived company accountability | .36 | .162 | .573 |
| | Victimisation severity → Avoidance → Perceived company accountability | -.01 | -.070 | .024 |
| | Victimisation severity → Anger → Avoidance → Perceived company accountability | -.02 | -.051 | .012 |
| B3 | Victimisation severity → Fear → Perceived company accountability | .06 | -.046 | .183 |
| | Victimisation severity → Retaliation → Perceived company accountability | .03 | -.047 | .104 |
| | Victimisation severity → Fear → Retaliation → Perceived company accountability | .07 | .022 | .127 |
| B4 | Victimisation severity → Fear → Perceived company accountability | .13 | .027 | .254 |
| | Victimisation severity → Avoidance → Perceived company accountability | -.01 | -.078 | .047 |
| | Victimisation severity → Fear → Avoidance → Perceived company accountability | 0 | -.008 | .013 |

For negative well-being, in most cases (except model A4), only one causal chain involving only coping strategy (Victimisation severity \rightarrow Retaliation/Avoidance \rightarrow Negative well-being) yielded confidence intervals containing zero, indicating non-significant mediating effects of coping strategy alone. The results further showed a non-significant direct effect of victimisation severity on negative well-being for all cases, verifying the full mediating effects. Thus, the results confirm H2a, H3a and H4a. Figure 4.2–4.5 illustrate proposed models with statistical results, where the solid line represents significant results and the dashed line represents non-significant results. For Model A4, the full mediating path (Victimisation severity \rightarrow Fear \rightarrow Avoidance \rightarrow Negative well-being) yielded confidence intervals containing zero, verifying no mediating effects when fear and avoidance were combined. Hence, H5a is not supported.

For perceived company accountability, in contrast with negative well-being, the results reported significant direct effects of victimisation severity on perceived company accountability for all cases, verifying the partial mediating effects. In most cases (except model B3), only one causal chain involving only negative emotion (Victimisation severity \rightarrow Anger/Fear \rightarrow Perceived company accountability), the confidence intervals did not contain zero, indicating significant mediating effects of negative emotion alone. The results further reported non-significant mediating effects of coping strategy alone for all cases as confidence intervals contained zero. Moreover, results show significant mediating effects of the full mediating paths (Victimisation severity \rightarrow Negative emotion \rightarrow Coping strategy \rightarrow Perceived company accountability) for retaliation only (Model B1 and B3), where avoidance appeared to have no significant results (Model B2 and B4) because the confidence intervals contained zero. Thus, H2b and H4b are supported, whereas H3b and H5b are not supported.

The proposed models with statistical results are illustrated in Figure 4.6–4.9. A summary of the hypothesis tests are shown in Table 4.3.

Table 4.3 Summary of the results

| | Hypothesis | Summary |
|-----|---|----------------|
| H1 | Bystander reactions moderate the effect of victimisation severity on anger and fear | Not supported |
| H2a | Victimisation severity → Anger → Retaliation → Negative well-being | Supported |
| H2b | Victimisation severity → Anger → Retaliation → Perceived company accountability | Supported |
| H3a | Victimisation severity → Anger → Avoidance → Negative well-being | Supported |
| H3b | Victimisation severity → Anger → Avoidance → Perceived company accountability | Not supported |
| H4a | Victimisation severity → Fear → Retaliation → Negative well-being | Supported |
| H4b | Victimisation severity → Fear → Retaliation → Perceived company accountability | Supported |
| H5a | Victimisation severity → Fear → Avoidance → Negative well-being | Not supported |
| H5b | Victimisation severity → Fear → Avoidance → Perceived company accountability | Not supported |

4.5 Discussion

The purpose of this study was to investigate how victims respond to being bullied in online brand communities. Specifically, it set out to (1) examine how victims appraise and cope with being bullied in online brand communities and (2) assess the impact of brand victimisation on some potential psychological consequences. The theory of stress and coping (Lazarus and Folkman 1984) helps to provide a more comprehensive understanding on how victims respond to being bullied in online brand communities. Findings from existing research in Psychology were used to formulate hypotheses around the mediating effects of cognitive appraisal and coping strategy on the effects of victimisation severity on negative

well-being and perceived company accountability, as well as the moderating effects of the bystander reactions.

The results demonstrate that being bullied in online brand communities can cause negative emotions in terms of anger and fear. Consistent with the findings of previous studies (Breitsohl and Garrod 2016; Camacho, Hassanein, and Head 2018), our results show that negative emotions vary depending on the severity level of the incident in that the more severe leads to stronger anger and fear. However, negative emotions were not moderated by bystander reactions since results indicate that bystander reactions did not affect the degree to which victims experienced anger and fear caused by being bullied, which is not in line with what we hypothesised. Moreover, the findings suggest that, in most cases, cognitive appraisal and coping strategy mediate the relationship between victimisation severity and two outcome variables (negative well-being and perceived company accountability), which is consistent with the theory of stress and coping (Lazarus and Folkman 1984). The results further indicate that retaliation and avoidance lead to opposite effects. In line with the extant findings (Machackova et al. 2013; Machmutow et al. 2012; Na, Dancy, and Park 2015), the outcomes were more favourable when victims employed an avoidance strategy and less favourable when victims decided to retaliate to the bully, where avoidance lead to lower negative well-being compared to when victims employed retaliation. These findings and their implications are discussed in the below sections.

4.5.1 Theoretical implications

This study contributes to the scarce digital marketing research on cybervictimisation in online brand communities. Research in this area has mainly relied on netnographic observations, and that the consequences of being bullied by fellow brand followers cannot

be investigated by analysing online comments, which has been acknowledged as a gap in the literature (Bacile et al. 2018; Breitsohl, Roschk, and Feyertag 2018). The study thus addresses the gap in the literature and enriches current knowledge by expanding the cybervictimisation concept to the context of online brand communities, as well as focusing on the overlooked perspective of a consumer who is bullied by fellow brand followers in an online brand community.

By applying the theory of stress and coping (Lazarus and Folkman 1984) into the context of brand victimisation, this study is the first to provide an empirically verified framework which illustrates how consumers respond to being bullied in online brand communities. The findings add to the limited knowledge on the negative impact of being bullied in online brand communities by demonstrating the detrimental effects of brand victimisation on victims' psychological well-being and accountability perception towards companies that hosted online brand communities. The negative impact of brand victimisation on victim's well-being is consistent with and enriches the cybervictimisation research in Psychology that highlights the detrimental psychological consequences for victims (Kowalski et al. 2014), but has been overlooked in a context of online brand communities.

The mediation analyses first indicate that victimisation severity did not impact negative well-being directly but through cognitive appraisal and coping strategy, whereas the direct effects were significant in case of perceived company accountability. In other words, cognitive appraisal and coping strategy fully mediated the effects of victimisation severity on negative well-being but partially mediated the relationship between victimisation severity and perceived company accountability. Consistent with Bacile et al. (2018), we show that victims will assign some accountability to the company when being bullied in online brand communities. Our study extends the knowledge by adding that the victims still assign some

accountability to the company regardless of the anger or fear they feel, as well as how the company copes with the incident.

Furthermore, the mediation analysis further deepens extant knowledge on factors influencing victims' behaviours. While extant research shows the importance of situational factors (e.g., incident severity and bystander reactions) on influencing the negative consequences of brand victimisation, this study is the first to highlight the role of emotions on influencing how consumers respond to being bullied in online brand communities. Specifically, the findings indicate significant mediating effects of anger and fear on the effects of victimisation severity on both negative well-being and perceived company accountability. The findings enrich current knowledge on the importance of negative emotions that shape consumer behaviours (e.g., Romani, Grappi, and Dalli 2012) by expanding it to a context of cybervictimisation in online brand communities. We show that how victims experience negative well-being and perceive towards company accountability when being bullied depends on how they feel anger and/or fear about the incident.

However, moderation analysis indicates that negative emotions are not moderated by bystander reactions as the results show that bystander reactions did not affect the degree to which victims experiencing anger and fear caused by brand victimisation. While cybervictimisation research shows that bystander reactions affect the consequences of being bullied; for instance, the negative impact for victims seem to be buffered (e.g., less anxious and less depressed) when the victims are defended (Sainio et al. 2010), the present findings reveal that bystander reactions did not affect the degree to which victims feel anger and fear when being bullied in online brand communities. In other words, victims are likely to feel anger and fear no matter what reactions they get from other brand followers in the online brand communities during the victimisation incident. These non-significant moderation

effect may be explained by the concept of power imbalance that can be derived by a difference in the number of bullies compared to bystanders (Menesini and Nocentini 2009). It could be that the reaction from only one bystander, which operationalised in our manipulation, did not have enough effect that can change the way victims appraise and react to the brand victimisation through negative emotions of anger and fear, or it could be that victims might expect more bystanders to support them.

The mediation tests do not reveal significant indirect effects of victimisation severity on both negative well-being and perceived company accountability through a coping strategy alone, without considering negative emotions. This indicates that victimisation severity did not activate coping mechanism directly, but through negative emotions. In line with the theory of stress and coping (Lazarus and Folkman 1984), the findings propose that anger and fear play an important role on victim coping behaviours by triggering both retaliation and avoidance coping approach. Specifically, victims who had higher levels of anger when being bullied were more likely to employ retaliation as a coping strategy. Surprisingly, angry victims tended to employ avoidance as a coping strategy too, which is contrary to the extant findings (Camodeca and Goossens 2005; Keith 2018). This could be because the situation is perceived as uncontrollable as has been found in other research.

Although anger has usually been linked to problem-focused rather than emotion-focused coping strategies (Kochenderfer-Ladd 2004), some researchers argued that individuals may decide to cope with stressful situations by using an avoidance strategy if they perceive that such situations are uncontrollable. For instance, Perrewé and Zellars (1999) found that angry employees who want to keep his/her job may decide to withdraw themselves from organisationally uncontrollable stress rather than addressing such problems. Interestingly, we also found that as well as only anger having a positive link with retaliation,

fear appears to be an antecedent of retaliation as well. The results also indicate a non-significant relationship between fear and avoidance. A possible explanation of why fear has a positive effect on retaliation but has a non-significant effect on avoidance could be because people tend to feel more comfortable to react to victimisation online than in a face-to-face situation (Kowalski et al. 2014). As such, a fearful victim may feel comfortable retaliating to the bully due to the anonymity of being online.

Lastly, the findings add to the extant knowledge on victim behaviour by demonstrating how consumers cope with being bullied by fellow brand followers in online brand communities, an area that has been overlooked in the online brand community literature. The findings enrich current knowledge by highlighting the role of two specific coping strategies (retaliation and avoidance) on buffering the negative impact of brand victimisation on victims. We found that retaliation, with either anger or fear, mediate the effects of victimisation severity on both negative well-being and perceived company accountability. We also found that avoidance, with anger only, mediate the effects of victimisation severity on negative well-being only. Importantly, we found that retaliation and avoidance have opposing effects on negative well-being in that avoidance leads to lower negative well-being compared to retaliation. Although the mediating effect of avoidance on perceived company accountability was not significant, there is a trend in the data showing the opposing effects of retaliation and avoidance on this outcome as well.

These results conclude that an avoidance strategy only matters when brand victimisation affects the well-being of victims but not victim's perceptions towards the company. The decision to avoid a brand victimisation incident can prevent victims from experiencing negative well-being (i.e., depression, anxiety and stress). The opposite was shown for those who retaliate with the bully as the results show that victims who use a

retaliation strategy had higher negative well-being and perceived company accountability. While previous research has shown that using an avoidance strategy to cope with stressful situations can lead to either positive outcomes (Sengupta, Balaji, and Krishnan 2015; Machackova et al. 2013) or negative outcomes (Strizhakova, Tsarenko, and Ruth 2012; Völlink et al. 2013), the present findings further help to clarify these contradictory findings by showing the effectiveness of an avoidance strategy in a brand victimisation context.

4.5.2 Managerial implications

The present findings provide insights that help brand managers to understand consumer behaviour when being bullied in online brand communities. It highlights the negative consequences of brand victimisation for both consumers and brands, as well as provides guidance on how such negative consequences can be mitigated. As coping mechanisms of victims tend to be activated when encountering brand victimisation, the outcomes still vary depending on the types of coping. As such, how victims cope with being bullied in online brand communities deserves attention by brand managers.

The findings demonstrate that if a victim decides not to retaliate with the bully, the decision to avoid the victimisation incident can protect them from experiencing unanticipated depression, anxiety, or stress. Our findings also show that some degree of accountability will be appointed to a company when brand victimisation occurs in a respective online brand community. While the results show no significant effect on perceived company accountability when victims decide to use an avoidance strategy and ignore a victimisation incident, an act of retaliation leads to a higher degree of accountability that the victims appoint to a firm. Because victims may use different coping strategies when coping with brand victimisation incident, an important managerial goal for a company's intervention

strategy to mitigate the negative impact of brand victimisation is to approach victims who take revenge with the bully. Community managers should encourage victims to use an avoidance strategy and withdraw from the incident (e.g., avoiding the bullies, leaving the comment section, or turning to something else) when the victimisation occurs.

Given that brand victimisation can cause negative consequences to victims, the study thus encourages companies to detect and tackle brand victimisation that occurs in their hosted online brand communities. Since victims are likely to expect companies to address the victimisation that occurs in online brand communities regardless of how they cope with the incident, failing to take actions might harm the relationship between victims and companies because companies' inaction can be interpreted that brand victimisation is acceptable as it is silently allowed by the hosted companies (Bacile et al. 2018). Therefore, we suggest community managers further tackle brand victimisation by showing responsibility to support victims. Community managers can do this by utilising an intelligent system such as a social media monitoring tool (e.g., Hootsuite, Brandwatch) to help identify occurrences of brand victimisation within their online brand communities and take action to moderate the situation (Van Hee et al. 2015).

4.5.3 Limitations and suggestions for future research

As with any study, this study has some limitations and some avenues for future research that are worth mentioning. First, there is a typical limitation to the scenario-based experimental design due to 'reactivity effects' (Coolican 2018). Reactivity effects occur if participants realise they are being a part of an experiment. However, most experiments require participants to follow instructions, thus participants must be aware that they are in the experiments. As such, participants' behaviour may be affected by this knowledge.

Therefore, the experiment and the way it was conducted might affect how participants cope with negative emotions when being bullied. It might be that participants just easily avoided being bullied in the experiment, however this may not be the case when experiencing brand victimisation in reality.

Second, the non-significant mediating effects suggest that there might be some other factors that could help to understand consumer coping behaviour when dealing with brand victimisation in online brand communities. A possible extension of the model presented in this study would be to examine additional coping strategies that victims would employ after being bullied in online brand communities such as social support seeking (Machackova et al. 2013). Additionally, as our findings provide empirical evidence on the negative consequences of brand victimisation for consumers and brands, future studies can explore further the brand-related outcomes that would potentially be affected by brand victimisation such as brand loyalty (Laroche, Habibi, and Richard 2013) and consumer engagement in online brand communities (Brodie et al. 2013). These factors may help to illustrate how negative emotion (e.g., fear) leads to one coping strategy but not the other, as well as how such coping strategy significantly affect one outcome but not the others.

Lastly, the non-significant moderating effect of bystander reactions suggest that there might be conditions not covered in this study that future research can investigate further. Since the present findings show that victims tend to assign some accountability to the company, future research may include; for instance, the manipulation of a company intervention into an experiment to examine whether there is any change in cognitive appraisal and coping strategy that victims may use.

4.6. Conclusion

The present study investigates the overlooked context of cybervictimisation in online brand communities. The findings show that victimisation taking place in online brand communities has the potential to create negative effects on victim's well-being and perception towards company accountability. The mediation analyses highlight that these negative effects vary depending on how victims react to the incident through negative emotions (anger and fear) and coping strategies (retaliation and avoidance). In most cases, negative emotions and coping strategies mediate the effect of victimisation severity on negative well-being and perceived company accountability. Specifically, retaliation and avoidance appeared to have opposing effects on negative well-being. The findings offer an insight to the digital marketing literature by being the first to investigate how victims respond to being bullied by fellow brand followers in online brand communities. The findings, thus, encourage companies to detect and tackle brand victimisation in their online brand communities. Finally, the study calls for further research on the cybervictimisation in online brand communities.

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Chapter 5: Conclusion

Online brand communities on social media have changed the way brand followers interact with each other (de Vries, Gensler, and Leeflang 2012). However, there is a dark side to online brand communities as brand followers increasingly turn hostile against one another (Breitsohl, Roschk, and Feyertag 2018), and this has implications for both scholars and brand managers. As online brand communities have become more integrated into consumer online activities, it is increasingly important for scholars and brand managers to consider the negative consequences of brand victimisation. Throughout this thesis, the process of a consumer being bullied by other brand followers in online brand communities was investigated. The thesis aimed to provide a comprehensive review of the areas of brand victimisation in online brand communities, as well as the development of a conceptual model to explain the interaction process. Moreover, it aimed to explore the potential negative consequences that brand victimisation may have on victims and brands. The thesis also aimed to provide a model that explains the process that consumers go through when being bullied in online brand communities. Finally, the thesis aimed to suggest how the negative consequences of brand victimisation can be mitigated. This thesis thus set out to answer the following research questions: (1) What is known about inter-consumer hostility in online brand communities and what remains unexplored and needs to be investigated further? What theoretical model can help to conceptualise inter-consumer hostility as a marketing phenomenon?, (2) What are the potential negative consequences of brand victimisation in online brand communities for victims and brands? and (3) What process do victims undergo when coping with being bullied in online brand communities? To achieve these goals, three independent studies were conducted.

The first study (Chapter 2) synthesises the existing research in the area of cybervictimisation in online brand communities. It conceptualises inter-consumer hostility and develops the conceptual framework which identifies five major dimensions that affect brand victimisation in online brand communities. This was done based on Lasswell's model of communication – “Who, Says what, In which channel, To whom, With what effect” (Lasswell 1948). Finally, the study shows the current state of research in the area and highlights some research gaps, offering avenues for future research in this area.

The second study (Chapter 3) explores the potential negative consequences of brand victimisation for both victims and brands. It breaks new ground by demonstrating the potential brand- and community-related outcomes of cybervictimisation, including PWOM intentions, community satisfaction, and community following intentions. Importantly, it is the first to consider the interaction effects between victimisation severity and bystander reactions on such outcome variables.

The third study (Chapter 4) further highlights additional potential negative consequences of brand victimisation. It extends research on the effects of being bullied in online brand communities by further showing the indirect effects of brand victimisation on a victim's well-being and perceived company accountability through potential mediators. Specifically, the results confirm that negative emotions (anger and fear) and coping strategies (retaliation and avoidance) mediate the effect of brand victimisation on such outcome variables. The study thus explains how victims feel about and cope with the brand victimisation incident.

Overall, this thesis provides a comprehensive look at the online phenomenon of brand victimisation including what effects it has on victims, how victims cope with it, and how situational factors such as victimisation severity and bystander reactions affect the outcomes.

Most importantly, it contributes to marketing theory and practices in various ways, as summarised in the following sections.

5.1 Theoretical implications

This thesis contributes to the limited literature of online brand community research on hostile interactions between consumers (Appel et al. 2020; Yadav and Pavlou 2014) by examining such hostile interactions in online brand communities. In contributing to this area of research, it enriches current knowledge by expanding the cybervictimisation concept to the context of online brand communities, focusing on the overlooked perspective of victims. It adds to the scarce quantitative research in the area by examining negative consequences of brand victimisation for both victims and brands.

The first study (Chapter 2) delineates the domain of cybervictimisation in online brand communities by synthesising past research in the domain. It contributes to the ongoing development of research in the domain by being the first to develop a conceptual framework that provides a comprehensive understanding of the victimisation process that occurs in online brand communities and articulates factors that affect the victimisation process. Moreover, the framework provides an overview of the current state of knowledge in the domain, outlines the scope of the topic, identifies existing gaps in the literature and provides an agenda for future research in the domain.

Specifically, the framework describes antecedents, process, and outcomes of victimisation in online brand communities. However, the study identifies that past research in the domain has provided evidence of cybervictimisation in online brand communities from the bully's perspective, whereas the victim's perspective has received less attention. While existing studies provide understanding on why and how consumers attack each other, the

consequences of such negative C2C interactions for consumers and brands have been largely unexplored. Given that negative C2C interactions in online brand communities can cause a detrimental impact on both consumers and brands, the study thus highlights the importance for future research in examining the potential negative consequences of such hostile interactions between consumers.

The second study (Chapter 3) advocates that brand victimisation in online brand communities leads to detrimental consequences for brands. The study addresses the lack of knowledge on victims by being the first to highlight the negative impact of being bullied in online brand communities on brand- and community-related consequences, as well as test hypotheses around the interaction effects between victimisation severity and bystander reactions on such consequences. The study thus provides empirical evidence to support the argument about the negative effects of brand victimisation by highlighting that victims will experience lower PWOM intentions, community satisfaction and community following intentions compared to non-victims.

In exploring three types of bystander reactions (Defending, Reinforcing, and Pretending), the second study further provides new insights into both online brand community and cybervictimisation research. While past research suggests bystanders reinforcing a bully to be the most harmful type of bystander reactions (Salmivalli 2010), the study argues that, for severe cases of victimisation, bystanders' pretending that nothing happened can have a more detrimental impact on the victims. These findings enrich the existing knowledge by emphasising the complexity of interactional dynamics taking place in hostile interactions among brand followers in online brand communities. The findings add to the current knowledge in online brand community research that consumers not only prefer companies to get involved in hostile interactions among them (Bacile et al. 2018; Dineva,

Breitsohl, and Garrod 2017), but they also seem to prefer bystanders to get involved rather than pretend that nothing happened.

Given that brand victimisation can cause a negative impact on consumers and brands, the third study (chapter 4) further contributes to the limited knowledge on victims by putting forward the significance of coping strategies that victims may use to cope with being bullied in online brand communities as an important construct on mitigating the negative outcomes of brand victimisation. The study first offers a model about the process that victims go through when being bullied in online brand communities, which is conceptualised by drawing on the theory of stress and coping (Lazarus and Folkman 1984). By testing the model quantitatively, the study further provides empirical evidence on the negative outcomes of brand victimisation towards consumer psychological well-being and perception towards company accountability.

Moreover, the study advocates the important role of a psychological factor (negative emotions) and behavioural factor (coping strategies) during a victimisation process as outlined in the psychology literature (Kowalski et al. 2014; Raskauskas and Huynh 2015) and expands knowledge by applying it to a brand victimisation context. It provides empirical evidence on the mediating effects of negative emotions (anger and fear) and coping strategies (retaliation and avoidance) on the two outcomes. The mediation analysis indicates that brand victimisation does not cause negative well-being directly, but through the mediating effect of emotion appraisal and coping strategy. However, victims still assign some degree of accountability to the hosted company regardless of the anger or fear they feel, or which strategy they use to cope with such negative emotions. Importantly, the study further provides evidence that avoidance is a more preferable coping strategy than retaliation as it can buffer the negative effects of brand victimisation on victim's well-being. This further helps to

clarify the contradictory results from past studies, where an avoidance strategy has been seen to lead to a positive outcome (Machackova et al. 2013) or a negative outcome (Strizhakova, Tsarenko, and Ruth 2012), by showing positive outcomes of avoidance strategies in a brand victimisation context. Given that brand victimisation can cause some detrimental consequences for consumers and brands, an understanding of a consumer's reaction to brand victimisation is important to shed light on how such negative outcomes can be mitigated.

5.2 Managerial implications

This thesis offers new insights that potentially impact managerial thinking and practice. It generally highlights the need for community managers to take care about monitoring and responding to bullying within their communities. The first study (Chapter 2) develops a conceptual framework that provides a comprehensive understanding of the brand victimisation process. It offers new insights for companies by showing why and how consumers attack one another in online brand communities, as well as highlighting the negative consequences of brand victimisation for brands. These insights will help companies to become more aware of brand victimisation, an online phenomenon that frequently occurs in online brand communities, and will ultimately encourage companies to take action in order to mitigate the negative outcomes that might occur.

The second study (Chapter 3) demonstrates that, without social support from the community, being bullied in online brand communities is likely to lead victims to become less satisfied with the community, exhibit lower intentions to keep following the community, and lower intentions to spread PWOM. Therefore, the findings suggest community managers might verbally intervene when moderating the situation, especially when the victimisation is severe, no matter whether community members support the bully or stay silent. Given the

immense comments generated by brand followers, as well as the speed at which brand followers can interact with each other via social media (de Vries, Gensler, and Leeftang 2012), an intelligent system such as a social media monitoring tool (e.g., Hootsuite, Brandwatch) is very useful for community managers to help identify occurrences of brand victimisation within their online brand communities (Van Hee et al. 2015). This allows community managers to detect and deal with brand victimisation quickly and effectively, which helps mitigate its potential risks.

Companies that host online brand communities should have a code of conduct within the community and provide community rules that highlight what is seen as bullying, and how victims can be supported. Community managers can be more proactive by deleting comments that break the rules. Furthermore, companies can indirectly address brand victimisation incidents by having active communities of brand followers to help monitor online brand communities, take actions on behalf of the companies, as well as support the brand victims when needed. Companies can encourage brand followers to keep an eye on the community and to encourage more positive interactions in the online brand communities. The thesis thus suggests that proactively encouraging brand followers to work positively within the online brand communities can help companies to mitigate the negative impact of brand victimisation and maintain a positive online environment for brand followers.

The third study (Chapter 4) further provides insights that help companies to understand consumer behaviours when being bullied in online brand communities, as well as providing some guidance on how to mitigate the negative consequences of brand victimisation. First, community managers need to be aware of the negative impact of brand victimisation on a brand victim's negative well-being (i.e., unanticipated depression, anxiety, and stress). The findings confirm that brand victimisation can have a negative impact on well-

being for victims similar to what the other types of cybervictimisation do (Kowalski et al. 2014). Second, community managers should also be aware of the negative impact of brand victimisation on brand victim's perceived company accountability. Although the findings indicate that brand victimisation is likely to cause detrimental outcomes for companies, many companies do not address hostile interactions between brand followers that occur in their online brand communities (Bacile et al. 2018; Dineva, Breitsohl, and Garrod 2017). Since the findings show that victims are likely to expect companies to address the victimisation that occurs in online brand communities, the study therefore suggests that failing to take action might harm the relationship between victims and brands as brand victimisation may appear to be silently allowed by the hosting companies (Bacile et al. 2018), which possibly harms the CSR image of such companies (Vveinhardt, Andriukaitiene, and Vienazindiene 2018).

The findings from the third study further suggest community managers to consider how consumers cope with being bullied in online brand communities. The findings indicate that the victim's decision to retaliate to the bully leads to higher negative well-being and a higher degree of accountability that the victims associate with a firm. On the other hand, the decision to avoid the victimisation incident can protect victims from experiencing such negative well-being. Importantly, the study emphasises the importance of company intervention as victims always assign some accountability to companies and expect companies to address the victimisation that occurs in their online brand communities regardless of how they cope with the incident. Therefore, an important managerial practice to mitigate the negative consequences is to approach victims who take revenge. Company actions might include defending victims and encouraging them to use avoidance strategy (e.g., avoiding the bullies, leaving the comment section, or turning to something else).

To sum up, understanding the negative consequences of brand victimisation in online brand communities is important as the findings of this thesis highlight the negative effects of brand victimisation on the relationship that victims have with a brand and its community. The thesis proposes that brand victimisation in online brand communities represents a CSR opportunity, thus being more proactive in supporting the victims can be beneficial for companies. Therefore, the findings of this thesis encourage companies to detect and tackle brand victimisation that occurs in their online brand communities.

5.3 Limitations and future research

As with any research, this thesis has some limitations. The experiment and the way it was conducted might affect how participants respond to brand victimisation. There is a typical limitation to the scenario-based experimental design due to a reactivity effect, which might be a threat to internal validity. A bias may occur if participants realise they are part of an experiment, and their behaviour may be affected by this knowledge (Coolican 2018). However, many experiments require participants to follow instructions, thus participants are likely to be aware that they are in the experiments (Babin et al. 2020). Another limitation to the scenario-based experimental design is an issue of realism as the experiment requires participants to imagine themselves in the hypothetical situation (Kim and Jang 2014). The realism of the scenario might affect how participants respond to the scenario. The experiment may also be limited by demand characteristics given the scenario was hypothetical, and therefore, perhaps less realistic than in a more natural situation (Babin et al. 2020).

To increase the realism, the scenarios used in the experiment (chapter 3 and 4) were designed in close relation to real-life situations taken from online brand communities on Facebook, as suggested by Breitsohl and Garrod (2016). A pre-test was conducted prior to

the actual data collection to ensure participants perceived the manipulations as intended, as suggested by van Noort and Willemssen (2012). Participants were asked to rate the realism of the scenarios to ensure the scenarios were viewed as realistic, but this will always be a contrived situation unless observed in a more natural setting. To further increase scenario realism, the scenarios and some measurement items were personalised for each participant (i.e., brand name and Facebook name) by using the ‘piped text’ function provided by the online survey platform. Importantly, as suggested by Barratt, Ferris, and Lenton (2015), a purposive sampling approach was adopted and screening criteria was utilised at the beginning of the survey targeting participants who used to be victims in the past. It is possible that participants who have never been victims might perceive the hypothetical scenario as less realistic than those who used to be victims in the past.

Furthermore, some limitations of this thesis provide suggestions for future research. In particular, the scenarios used in the experiment could have been more complex and realistic. The scenarios portrayed incidents of trolling, while other forms of victimisation such as attacking between brand rivals are conceivable too. Regarding the manipulation, only two bystanders were used to operationalise bystander reactions. However, in reality, more comments with a mix of bystander reactions are likely to be made during a victimisation event (Breitsohl, Roschk, and Feyertag 2018). Therefore, future studies can consider further interactional dynamics between brand followers by examining how the quantity of comments and additional bystander reactions affect victims’ reactions.

5.4 A closing note

This thesis provides novel contributions to knowledge concerning the consequences of brand victimisation – the incident of a consumer being bullied by fellow brand followers

in an online brand community – which has been overlooked in the online brand community literature. It offers insights on how victims react to being bullied in online brand communities. The thesis provides fresh insights on the interaction effects between victimisation severity and bystander reactions on the consumer outcomes. One of the most important outcomes of this thesis is that it demonstrates the negative impact of brand victimisation on brand- and community-related outcomes. It is becoming clear that hostile C2C interactions such as brand victimisation can have detrimental effects on victims and the respective brands, which companies need to be acknowledged. As such, the results of this thesis encourage companies to detect and tackle brand victimisation that may occur in their online brand communities.

Although marketing research in the area of brand victimisation is still in its infancy, this thesis pushes the research beyond traditional disciplinary boundaries by linking inter-consumer hostility in online brand communities to the rich theoretical literature on cybervictimisation. As communication technologies and online marketing platforms continue to develop, it is crucial to understand the impact of brand victimisation in the online environment due to the negative impacts upon brands and consumers of those brands. Fresh insights that this thesis provides are expected to create ideas for future research, give directions for future exploration, and help establish a rich theoretical literature on brand victimisation in online brand communities.

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